空蝉

ヒカルが地球にいたころ……①

Utsusemi
When Hikaru was on the earth

野村美月
イラスト◉竹岡美穂

ファミ通文庫

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〝空蟬〟
ヒカルが地球にいたころ……⑦

野村美月

ファミ通文庫

カバーイラスト　竹岡美穂

野村美月
Mizuki Nomura
知る人ぞ知る合唱王国福島出身。幼い頃より「物語」を作るのが好きで、作家を目指す。「赤城山卓球場に歌声は響く」で第3回えんため大賞小説部門最優秀賞を受賞。趣味、朝寝、昼寝、夜寝、寝ること全般。主著に『卓球場シリーズ』『Bad! Daddy』『うさ恋。』『〝文学少女〟』などがある。

竹岡美穂
Miho Takeoka
7月1日生まれ。東京都出身、埼玉県在住の絵描き屋さん。お茶とウサギと古い博物図鑑、透明水彩と月光荘のスケッチブックをこよなく愛する。絵を描くか、何か創っていれば大いに幸せ。
http://www.nezicaplant.com/

ヒカルの〝最愛〟。その人の想いを尋ねようと訪れた教会で、是光とヒカルは清楚な女性に出会う。空という名の彼女は、〝天使の子〟を身ごもっているという……。「どうしよう。きっと僕の子だ」「って、何だとぉ――っ!?」空と子供を守ろうと奔走する是光だったが、学園に誤報が飛び交い、あらぬ疑いをかけられて……!? ヒカルの子供の存在に動揺する葵、蠢動する一朱。様様な想いが交錯する中で、隠された真実が明らかになる――！大人気学園ロマンス、第7巻!!

FB
Famitsu Bunko

野村美月の著作リスト

卓球場シリーズ　全4巻
フォー マイ ダーリン!
月夜は無邪気に竜退治
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"若紫"　ヒカルが地球にいたころ……③
"朧月夜"　ヒカルが地球にいたころ……④
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空蟬

ヒカルが地球にいたころ……⑦

Utsusemi

When Hikaru was on the earth

「この子は、天使の子よ」

蟬ケ谷空

「この腕じゃダッコしたら落としちゃうし。
授業参観に出席しても見えないし、
七五三の家族写真にも写らないし、
キャッチボールもできない」
帝門ヒカル
「落ち着け、そもそもダッコできねーから落とす心配ねーから」
赤城是光

いつ、どこで、誰を孕ませたの？　出産予定日は？　病院は？」
斎賀朝衣
乳食、美味しそうだよねー。赤城、どれが食べたい？」
式部帆夏
ああ赤ちゃんのお尻ふきは、ウォーマーであたためてあげるほうがいいんだって」
花里みちる

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Prologue

When I first met you, I thought you were an angel. You smiled quietly amidst the fragrance of the flowers, embalmed by the clear, transparent light.
The white, beautiful sidelong face of yours looked so forlorn, seemingly yearning for salvation.
I swallowed my breath, and with all my strength, I tried to listen to your amazing voice.
From that day onwards, I lost my way.
Stop it already.
Forget about it already.
The aching continued to linger in my chest as I wished for an umpteenth time, but no matter how many times it was, I kept coming back to you. The orange Daylilies bloom in the summer wild, and is called the forgetful plant; the one who taught me those things was you.
That is why I grew those flowers resembling lilies, those flowers colored radiantly like the bright summer.
Hikaru, it was all to forget about you.

Chapter 1

“–Mr Akagi, I have something I wish to talk to you about.”
It was the end of summer vacation.
As the moist breeze blew by the riverbank in the night, Asai stared at Koremitsu with a glint of determination, saying this.
With a stern voice, she was hoping that Hikaru’s friend, Koremitsu would listen.
“It is about the true identity of the one Hikaru truly loves. This love that was unable to come true became his–”
“Wait.”
Hikaru, being right beside Koremitsu, quietly muttered as Koremitsu gasped right at the moment when Asai was about to to touch upon a core issue.
“Regarding that, please allow me to say it.”
And Koremitsu hurriedly tried to stop Asai.
“Hey, wait.”
However, Asai,
“The one Hikaru loves more than anyone else is,”
“Wait.”
“Hikaru’s–
“Hey!”
“Most beloved.”
Koremitsu’s words were seemingly not heard in any way.
“Didn’t I tell you to wait, Asa!?”
Koremitsu raised his eyebrows as he yelled.
Koremitsu was delighted that Asai, who before this had treated him as garbage, stinkbug, was finally able to recognize him as Hikaru’s friend and representative. Koremitsu too was very anxious to know about Hikaru’s secret, which she wanted to to say with such a heinous look. However, Hikaru himself was right beside Koremitsu, saying ‘wait’ with a serious look.
Asai could not see Hikaru in his ghost form, and that was probably the reason why she was able to say this so calmly. Koremitsu, the only one able to see Hikaru, was unable to hear the latter’s secrets like this.
Also, there were others along the riverbank. including the people from school, Honoka, Aoi, Tsuyako, Michiru, Hiina, and Tōjō. There were also Shioriko, practically a sister to Koremitsu, and Lapis the cat, amusing themselves with the fireworks.
Though they were all far away from them, playing with the fireworks, it seemed Honoka and Aoi were staring at Koremitsu and Asai from afar, looking perturbed, and Shioriko, holding the fireworks in hand, was puffing her cheeks unhappily as she glared at them. Naturally, it was impossible to talk about anything significant in such a situation.

The student council president Asai, who was widely dubbed as cool and capable, would surely have noticed the stares of the people around her. She however was so focused on Hikaru's matter that she was unable to affirm the situation around her, and she looked displeased that Koremitsu was hollering at her 'wait'.
"You tell me to wait? Till when?"
Her eyes got sharp as she said to Koremitsu.
That expression of hers was seemingly reproaching him, telling him that she was about to tell him this most important secret, but that the latter was faltering so much, not being manly at all.
"I can't say exactly when…but not now."
There was Asai's piercing glare from the right, Hikaru's pleading stare from the left, and Honoka, Aoi, Shioriko and the rest not too far away, staring at him, causing Koremitsu's armpits to sweat in tension. He had to calm Asai somewhat.
But before he could think of anything, Asai, being all angsty, yelled shrilly.
"If you keep on hesitating, that child will be born!"
Koremitsu was startled, and immediately embraced Asai, covering her mouth with his hand.
Asai's eyes widened.
(Did Asai just say a kid's about to be born!? Is it Hikaru's…!?)
Koremitsu frantically looked over at Hikaru, and found the latter frowning, looking perturbed.
(Hey, what's with that useless face!? Did you really have kid!?)
He wanted to ask about that at that moment.
However—
By the time he realized, Honoka, Aoi were no longer peeping on them, but leaning over, staring at him. Shioriko's cheeks were puffed bigger than ever, and also, even Tōjō and Tsuyako looked enthusiastic as they looked over at the duo, their stares filed with reproach or amusement. If Koremitsu were to look down, he would be able to see Asai's vague expression of fury and bashfulness, looking rigid all over.
"Ah, sorry."
And then, Koremitsu hurriedly let go as he said to Asai, the latter gritting her teeth as she stared back with a blushing face.
"Anyway, we'll talk about that later. Later as in, erm, the next semester, in school!"

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Once they got home…
"Big brother Koremitsu, how is that annoying person is that haughty woman with that high stare who always snorts and mocks others for their failure related to you in any way? That person doesn't look like she has any interests in men, but it looks like she's the type to flaunt her authority and carry out sexual harassment; did she do anything that mustn't be mentioned with you? You're the only one who can't do this, big brother!"

Koremitsu evaded Shioriko, who had her cheeks puffed as she questioned him and the cold eyes of Lapis staring at him as he hid inside his own room. Thus, he would be able to be alone with Hikaru. His legs were crossed as he sat on the tatamis, looking completely weary, and in front of him, Hikaru's languorous voice echoed like a mantra,
"…The Forget-me-not is a cute, petite flower that reflects the color of the sky. A knight once jumped into the waters for his lover, to retrieve a Forget-me-not on the surface, but lost his life…at the critical juncture of his life, he threw the bouquet to his lover, who was waiting at the riverbank, shouting 'forget me now!'…and his lover continued to reminiscence about him, and pined the forget-me-not for the rest of her life…and so, both of them remained in love even after death. To them, it surely must be the greatest happiness."
His clear eyes upon the shadows, he muttered quietly. The somber shadows appeared on the beautiful effeminate, white, speckless face.
And Koremitsu continued on nonchalantly,
"Well, it's awkward to have a bouquet of flowers thrown at me when someone's being washed away by the currents. I'll be shocked if I hear something like 'forget me not' on top of that."
"…Yes."
Hikaru lowered her head.
"Anyway, stop trying to change the topic by talking about flowers. What's with the baby about to be born?"
"It is simply Asa's misunderstanding."
"Misunderstanding?"
"For I was already dumped."
Hikaru cast aside the strength in his arms, his frail shoulders shinking.
(Eh? There's a woman who dumped this guy?"
This caused Koremitsu to be mildly surprised. Hikaru, hailed a harem prince when he was alive, was often surrounded by girls, and was beloved by them.
"There was someone I loved ever since I was young. Whenever I saw that person, my heart would unwittingly become sweet and fuzzy. I felt I was in ecstasy whenever she smiled, and I did have the thoughts that it would be great if the both of us were the only ones on Earth. I really loved everything about her; no, this was to a point even 'love' could no longer describe adequately. I really yearned, loved her so much that I could not help myself, but…she was already married to another person."
"A married wife!?"
"And then, she became my stepmother."
"Ack—"
Koremitsu was left speechless.
The judge presiding the calligraphy contest at the Gonomiya Residence, the young beautiful woman who resembled Hikaru so much was Hikaru's most beloved!

Koremitsu had a faint realization from his conversations with Yū and Shioriko the reason why Hikaru's love could not bloom.
And he realized that the woman was the one Hikaru truly yearned to have, the most beloved flower he could not get, but…
(Her name's called Fujino, if I remember. It's true that she's a beauty, and I guess the same goes for Hikaru if he's dressed in female clothing…wait, will anyone say that he loves a person who looks just like him? Is this guy's a narcissist? No, this isn't the problem here. The woman he loves is the wife of his dad. Is that a bad thing?)
"I was in sixth grade when she became the second wife of father, and my time with her became anguishing. When I got to middle school, I left that house.."
(So that's how it is…)
The person he loved became his stepmother, and became a couple with his father before him. Surely it was depressing to think about it.
"But I could not bring myself to forget her…once I left, I ended up loving her more, and I committed the one cardinal sin I did…"
"!"
Upon hearing this, Koremitsu inadvertently straightened himself.
(A cardinal sin!?)
Hikaru lowered his sights, his body becoming all frozen. He lowered his head =, wanting to endure the anguish in his heart as he bit his lips, just like the time when Koremitsu woke up in the middle of the night. That morose expression was heartbreaking to Koremitsu, who was watching all this
"D-did you do it with your stepmother…no, even you would…"
Hikaru continued to keep his lips sealed, and the drooping eyes showed a thickened haze and torment. This expression, this tense atmosphere clearly vindicated the fact that Hikaru did have a male-female relationship with his stepmother.
(Are you serious…?)
It was true that it was a taboo, not something that could be easily said. There was no guarantee that after saying that, the other party would be hurt.
And then, Koremitsu said in surprise,
"Wait, you did that thing with your stepmother. In other words, the kid that's to be born is from you and your stepmother…"
Right when the blood in Koremitsu's blood was about to glaciate, Hikaru argued back with an adamant, vigorous voice.
"The one time I had that sort of relationship with that woman was in 8th grade!"
"Huh, 8th grade…?"
"That was the only time…really, it was the one time. That person had been evading me ever since then, and the most she conversed with me in front of everyone was the bare minimum greetings. The gentle words were never

said to me again, and there were no words that allowed me to harbor hope. It seemed she wanted to forget about what happened back then, no, to pretend that it never happened."
With a hoarse voice, Hikaru continued to repeat, 'the only time'.
(If it's as what Hikaru had said, a kid conceived during 8th grade will not be born now…)
Koremitsu heaved a sigh of relief, and at the same time, his heart was aching because Hikaru's expression was too gloomy.
"That person..is now pregnant. Asa misunderstood and thought that was my child, and she was going about frantically for the child that is to be born. But the child in that person's belly is father's; I think it is best for me to forget about that person."
Perhaps that was why Hikaru decided to break up with all the girls he was dating, and devote himself fully to his fiancee Aoi.
If only Miss Aoi can be my 'most beloved'. Koremitsu recalled the words Hikaru said with a faint look. However, Miss Aoi is my hope.
(Does Aoi…know about the woman Hikaru loved most?)
Koremitsu pondered with these bitter memories in his mind.
If that was really the case, Aoi, who had an intimate relationship with Hikaru, would be unable to accept this fact like the other girls because of her own purity.
And Hikaru chose Aoi in the end, but because of his end, he was unable to personally celebrate the her 17th birthday which he planned for her, and unable to personally provide the confession.
Hikaru fell into a river on a night filled with torrential rainfall.
Why did Hikaru go to such a dangerous place on that night, when it was raining furious?
Tsuyako, Hikaru's mistress, did say that Hikaru did have slash marks on his wrists, and assumed that he killed himself. There were also rumors that Hikaru was murdered.
Now then, which exactly was the truth?
Hikaru clenched his fists.
"On the day I fell into the river, that person called me out using a letter. She would not look at me one bit, but she suddenly said that she wanted to see me…I did not know what that person was thinking, and I was feeling extremely uneasy within…but since the person I yearned hoped to meet me, I had to go…"
Hikaru then said that when he got to the promised place, he was unable to see the path in front of him very well due to the torrential downpour. The surging, violent rapids were crashing thunderously, as the visibility, and even his voice that was calling for the name was overwhelmed by this corroded rain. No matter how much the rain was lashing upon him, how much the gales struck him, Hikaru continued to search for his beloved so bitterly, wandering around. Finally, he lost his footing, and slipped into the river.

“So that means you died in an accident after all.”
Koremitsu asked Hikaru cautiously, and after some silence, the latter answered in anguish.
“…Yes.”
Koremitsu was truly concerned about the enigmatic silence, but before he could speak up, Hikaru lowered his eyes as he spoke with a crestfallen voice,
“There was someone…who grabbed my by the hand tightly the moment I fell into the river, wanting to pull me out. The feeling of those hands was something I still remember clearly.”
“Who else can it be? Isn’t that your stepmother?”
“…It was night, and the rain was heavy…so…I really could not see clearly. The hands certainly felt like a woman’s, definitely…”
And upon this, his eyes were filled with haze.
Hikaru must have been certain that the one who held his hand was his stepmother. However, for some reason, he was more anguished about this fact than what he had shown before. Like the knight who lost his life trying to get the sky-colored flowers floating on the river for his lover, one had to wonder what Hikaru was shouting to her the instance he was swept away by the river.
Or maybe, did that woman shout something to Hikaru after all?
In conclusion, a woman’s frail hands were never able to pull up a 15-year-old boy. And thus, Hikaru was swept away by the river, and drowned.
“It is undoubted that I fell into the river due to my own carelessness…that person bears no responsibility in that…but…if the one who grabbed my hand was that person…I will have to bear the anguish of that person again… my love for me caused her to be thoroughly injured…bringing her misfortune…and beyond that, I…”
A person died in front of her. On top of that, he was her stepson, whom she had an illicit relationship with…there certainly was no way she would be able to remove the suffering in her heart.
With his hands grabbing his head, Hikaru shook about, shivering. His face was contorted weakly, his lips showing a pale glint.
“I am scared, Koremitsu. I am scared of knowing that person’s inner heart… right now, at this moment, I wonder what that person is thinking, how exactly does she view me…how will she think of me in future…I am scared… scared…so scared…”
Hikaru could not stop his shivering, and shrank as he cuddled his head.
—I cannot do it, Koremitsu.
Koremitsu recalled Hikaru’s behavior during the calligraphy contest, when the latter’s face was pale, and he was being panicky all over. He kept begging to leave, but it was obvious to see that he was unable to cease the overflowing love, and the yearning emotions.
Koremitsu did not know what kind of love was such that two would want to be together without concern for taboos.

But he was finally able to empathize as well what caused Hikaru much anguish all this time, to a point where it was gouging out pieces of his soul.
‘I understand.”
Koremitsu solemnly noted.
“So you can’t ascend to the afterlife because you’re too worried about what your stepmother thinks.”
After showing some shock, Hikaru became frail as he shrank back.
“…This is not all…and there are a lot more things I am concerned with, because I still have lots of people I cannot bid farewell to…I do worry what will happen to everyone else after I die…”
“Then just leave everything aside for now. You probably want to know why your stepmother called you to the riverside that night, right?”
“…”
Hikaru went silent, seemingly contemplating. His lips were sealed, his eyes flickering in anguish. It seemed he would say ‘I am scared’, and Koremitsu got anxious as he spoke with conviction.
“Right, let us ask her tomorrow.”
Hikaru widened his eyes speechlessly.

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It was the next day, a Sunday morning.
Koremitsu arrived at a church in a quiet residential area. It was said that Fujino never once skipped a Sunday service.
Hikaru however was still grumbling, “Let us go back”, “I still cannot do it. My heart is aching so much I feel like I am dying.”
“But aren’t you dead already?”
Koremitsu quietly snarked back, and quickly stepped into the chapel. Several of the worshipers were terrified to see a red-haired youth with savage looking eyes looking around while slouching his back, and froze in place.
And Koremitsu immediately noticed where Fujino was.
She was seated at the frontmost row, her head lowered silently. So fleeting and lonely were her white sidelong face, the slender nape of her neck, and the long, lowered eyelashes, causing Koremitsu to recall the day Hikaru’s funeral was held.
She was a beautiful woman dressed in black, her eyes lowered as she waited at the relatives seats.
She had a face similar to that of Hikaru’s, tears dampening it, yet her lips were raised slightly for some reason.
Did Hikaru see that smile?
That was not a smile that should be shown at a funeral.
It was clear and serene, yet there was no tinge of blissfulness to be seen. It was a smile so unnatural.
Koremitsu ostensibly witnessed the same smile back then on Fujino’s face for an instance, and his back inadvertently chilled.

The organ’s music flared, and worship began. Hikaru’s eyes were fixated upon Fujno, seemingly wanting to devour the latter. The boy who was left helpless, wanting to leave in terror, had his eyes seemingly absorbed the moment she entered her eyes, and was nailed on, seemingly unable to move.
The eyebrows were frowning, the lips locked tightly; she looked so bitter, so broken.
Hikaru fell in love with the flower which he could not touch, and he poured into most of the other flowers in a way to replace her, hoping to forget that most beloved flower.
(I think she called him over to that place for his sake. If that stepmother found him to be a real bother, and sent the letter while intending to shut him up, only for Hikaru to die in front of her, causing her to be left a vengeful person, what will happen to this guy…?)
If he were hated to that extent, would he be able to release the emotional binds and ascend to the afterlife? Would his soul explode as it was due to excessive pain?
The pastor’s sermon did not reach his ears at all, and as he continued to ponder with that terrifying face, the service was over.
“Let’s go.”
After Koremitsu’s prompting, Hikaru froze up.
The former strode forth towards Fujino, but he could hardly move forward due to the many people. Even so, he could not push them aside forcefully, and just when he was getting impatient,
“!”
Koremitsu bumped into a young woman, seemingly affiliated to the church, who was handing out bazaar leaflets. He merely bumped into her shoulder lightly when she raised her hands, handing out the leaflets, but she cringed back, seemingly protecting her belly.
And Koremitsu was greatly taken aback by her reaction.
“H-hey, don’t tell me, you have a kid—”
This is bad! Did the impact hurt the fetus somehow?
He frantically tried to carry the woman cuddling the belly, and then noticed the little beauty mark by the left eye.
And once the other person noticed the red hair, rigid face and sharp eyes, she was startled,
“I-I’m fine here. It’s 7 months, already in the stable period. This little knock is fine. Sorry to scare you there.”
She then bowed to Koremitsu, ostensibly scampering as she left.
(Hey, I won’t steal a baby and eat it!)
He was disappointed, and yet relived to hear that nothing had happened, but when he was about to give chase after Fujino,
“What do I do?”
A whisper could be heard beside him.
He looked aside, and saw Hikaru’s pale face,

“Sora is actually pregnant.”
Sora…wait, actually pregnant!? Do you know this woman!?
The moment he wanted to ask, Hikaru groaned with a voice befitting the end of the world,
“The baby inside Sora may be mine.”

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“What do I do, what do I do?” as Hikaru continued to rattle off this mantra, Koremitsu too was left stupefied as he quickly returned home, locked the sliding door of his room, and cried out,
“Didn’t you just say that the baby’s just Asa’s misunderstanding here!? Now what’s with that ‘the baby may be mine’ line here!”
With a hapless expression, Hikaru answered,
“So I say, the child inside that person—Fujino is definitely my father. However, it is likely the child inside Sora may be mine…no, it most definitely is mine if she was pregnant for 7 months. Sora had never dated anyone else before, and at that time, I was in shambles, so hurt, and I never thought of the consequences…”
“So that’s basically no contraception!?”
“Please do not put it so directly!”
Hikaru squatted down with his head cuddled.
And then on, with a teeny-weeny voice, he explained how he met that woman at church, Sora Semigaya.
“Sora was the first woman I met. After I was rejected by that person on the first day of Summar, I was thoroughly wounded, battered. I came to the chapel hall, squatting inside, and it was Sora who found me, comforted me.”
Sora’s grandfather was the pastor of the church, and back then, she was studying in 11th grade. Due to some family reasons, she was residing in the church building.
And then, Sora embraced the thoroughly wounded Hikaru, and so the two of them did a cardinal sin in front of the altar.
“Hey, you were only in 7th grade, and in church too, in front of God! At least show some constraint!”
Koremitsu lashed out.
“I was that thoroughly wounded back then! If not for Sora comforting me, I would have been like Nello from ‘A Dog of Flanders’, with others finding my frozen corpse the next morning.”
“It’s just a night outside in the summer! Like you would have died! Stop yapping!”
Hikaru was left devastated, and then he continued on about Sora. It was the beginning of this March when he, decisively rejected by Fujono, decided to visit that church again while feeling that he was about to die, and then again, he met Sora.
“Sora’s grandfather died, and she no longer lived in the church, but she continued to work there as a volunteer, sometimes staying in the church. She appeared in front of me when I was at a dead end, embraced me, and to

me, she was a goddess of redemption. At that moment, I continued to snuggle within her embrace, drown in her, and managed to preserve my heart . If not for that, I would have been frozen dead that time. Unlike the first time, it was March, and the temperature was no different from winter. Without Sora letting me into the warm room and embracing me, I definitely would have frozen like an ice pillar. It was wide however, so I was cold even after entering that warm room. Yes, it was snowing since morning on that day, and the pure white snow piled up."
"Yeah, I get it, I get it. It's cold because it was winter, but you don't have to make that trembling voice like that. And then, you did that sort of thing in front of the altar again? Why not go to the room instead?"
"Being that hurt and thoroughly wounded, how could I have asked to go to a room? I was driven to a point where I forgot the contraception!"
"Why are you the anger one!? What about being worn out, frozen solid, when you have to put on something, put it on!"
"But you can say what a Board of Education member will say because you have no experience, Koremitsu."
"Sorry for being a virgin here! If I were part of the Board of Education, I would have sent a brat with a secret affair in a chapel hall to a correction facility!"
After this meaningless squabble, Hikaru lowered his eyebrows with resignation as he grumbled,
"What do I do now~~~~~~~!!"

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Events had developed to a point where there was absolutely no way of asking Fujino regarding her true thoughts at all.
The next day was the first day of the 2nd semester, and while one should be awaiting the new semester with refreshed feelings, Hikaru was beside Koremitsu, lowering his head that ostensibly touched the floor, "If it has been 7 months, I suppose it must have taken a human shape" and "Why didn't my pocket have that thing back then" and "When did Sora realize that she is pregnant." muttering on with an utterly pessimistic voice.
"Hey, you just said it's 7 months, right? It doesn't match up if we begin counting from March."
"The number of months goes back all the way from the last period."
"That sort of knowledge isn't something a 10th grade boy should, have, right!? Anyway, we're going to the church after school."
While he continued to walk down the path towards school with a scowling face,
"Go-good morning…! Akagi."
Honoka Shikibu's voice could be heard.
"Yo."
Once Koremitsu responded, Honoka walked beside him, letting out rustling sounds from her feet as she walked on. Nervous to speak up, she alternated

between looking to her side and looking down to the ground. Finally, she spoke clumsily,
“The fireworks two days ago…were really fun.”
“Yeah. I guess.”
“Akagi, it seemed there was a really intimate atmosphere between you and the Matriarch Asa back then.”
“Is that so?”
“Of course.”
Honoka suddenly raised her voice, and glared,
“Didn’t you sudden embrace the Matriarch Asa from behind!?”
“Huh? I just didn’t want her to say anything unnecessary, so I had to cover her mouth.”
“Do you think it’s that easy to shut a girl’s mouth up!? Her Highness Aoi and Michiru were looking very shocked and worried there. I-I didn’t really care about it thought.”
“Aoi…and Hanasato? Why?”
“Ugh, you really have no awareness, Akagi!”
Honoka raised her eyebrows as she chided him,
“…I do agree with that opinion.”
And even Hikaru, who was supposed to be downhearted, agreed with a gloomy voice.
(Aren’t you supposed to be in your useless state now? You can actually hear others out and retort!?)
While Koremitsu glared sidelong to Hikaru,
“Good morning, Hono, Mr Akagi.”
Honoka and her good friend, the class representative, Michiru Hanasato approached them with a bashful face.
She had undone the braids she had before and removed the glasses. It seemed she was going through with this appearance during the new semester too.
Honoka was taken aback for some reason, and she looked away from Koremitsu with an awkward face, her feet dragging the ground as she kept a slight distance away from him.
“Morning, Michiru. Your hair’s curled up nicely.”
“Thanks. Your hair’s rather smooth and pretty too, Hono.”
Honoka again slowed her pace while this girls talk was going on, and gradually left Koremitsu. In contrast, Michiru was staring at Koremitsu from top to bottom.
“Mr Akagi, have you finished your assignments?”
Koremitsu felt a little awkward to have such stares upon him, and averted his eyes. Then, he noticed a female on the other side of the road.
The woman’s limbs were long, the standing posture beautiful yet reeked of a lonely atmosphere. The sun shone through her thin her, and she swayed in the fleeting wind.
(That’s—)

Koremitsu let out a gasp, “Sora” and Hikaru called out.
Sora was standing on the pedestrian sidewalk, looking extremely melancholic, staring at the gates of Koremitsu’s school.
She was dressed in a fluffy trimmed tunic, and carefully placed her hand below the chest that was hidden under it.

And with a pained, anguished expression, she stared at the students who were attending school.
Soon after, she again lowered her eyes, and left.
“Shikibu, tell the teacher that I’ll be late.”
“Eh?”
“M-Mr Akagi…!?”
Koremitsu went off running, ignoring the flustered Honoka and Michiru.
Due to the traffic congestion, he was not able to cross the road easily. He continued to move forward without regard for his surroundings, chasing the beautiful figure that was leaving him. He saw the hair that was tied behind her casually, and the slender nape and shoulders that swayed fleetingly. The coat above the tunic let out a dazzling light under the morning sun, seemingly clad in a veil. The hem of her dress too swayed gently along with her steps.
(Damn it. I can’t close the distance!)
Her footsteps were so calm and slow, but he could not move forward much due to the crowd, and he could not give chase and catch up to her as much as he wanted to. Even so, to prevent losing sight of her, he continued to stare at her back, and finally arrived at a plain two storey block of apartments.
It seemed this was Sora’s house. She ascended the stairs on the outside, opened the door with the key, and entered.
“So Sora actually lived in such a nearby place.”
Hikaru muttered with loneliness.
And Koremitsu too walked up the stairs.
Panting, he rang the intercom.
There was no response.
He again pressed the intercom button, and as felt restless due to the lack of response, he knocked the door.
And then, the sound of the lock rang, and the door opened.
“Sorry for intruding out of a sudden. I’m—”
The moment he was about to introduce himself as Hikaru’s friend, he was left speechless.
Hikaru too widened his eyes.
Standing at the corridor was a young, pretty looking woman with a beauty mark under her left eye, Sora Semigaya.
For some reason, she was holding a fan-shaped broom, and with a feisty, ferocious look, she swung it down on Koremitsu’s head of messy red ahri.
“Somebody! A robber’s here!”
Whacked by the broomstick, Koremitsu’s ears were left ringing as Sora’s desperate yell reached them.
And so, he continued to be walloped by her.
“You’re mistaken! I’m—uwah!”
“Dear God! It’s a robber!”
“Sora, stop! Stop!”

And Hikaru was left helpless.
“—Ugh.”
Koremitsu grabbed the broomstick, and glared at Sora through his messy hair. “!” The latter gasped in fear.
Before she was about to yell about a robber and God, Koremitsu growled, “I’m Hikaru’s friend!”

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“I’m really sorry. You have a really scary look, and I thought you still had a grudge over what happened before, so I was really scared. I finally made it back home, the bell rang, and I saw you outside the window raising your eyebrows, looking all sweaty…so I really thought that…I-I beat you up with the broom because of that…erm, does it hurt? I guess it does, huh? It’s all swollen…uu.”
Sora knelt down on the tatamis, applied antiseptic on Koremitsu’s forehead, lacquered some medicine, and slapped some bandages, deftly treating his wounds as she earnestly apologized. From up close, Koremitsu could see the clear eyes filled with concern, and the beauty mark at the eye left a lasting impression on him.
“It’s nothing. This really isn’t much. I should be the one apologizing for scaring you.”
“Of course. It is your fault for standing at a person’s door as if you would have skinned him alive, and surely it was no fault of hers to mistake you for a robber.”
(Like you’re one to talk!)
Koremitsu glared at Hikaru, who was seated beside Sora,
“It hurts that much? Erm, do you need some headache medication to kill the pain?”
And Sora panicked, looking into the medicine box.
“No, I’m really alright here.”
“Is that so?” Sora whispered, but still looked worried as she stared at Koremitsu, and once she abruptly noticed that they were overly close to each other, she became bashful,
“I shall go brew some tea.”
And so, she stood up.
This allowed Koremitsu room to look around the room.
The apartment included the kitchen, and was standard sized, giving off the same plain vibe as seen from the outside. It was cleaned tidily, such that every corner seemed to have been cleaned, and even the lace curtains were white and clean.
The aroma pot contained a mixture of green tea and dried grapefruit skin,and the refreshing scent came from it.
The calm colored wall ornaments and cushions seemed handmade, and at the basket placed by the table, there was a little pair of socks in the midst of being sewn. It seemed she was making it for the baby.

“This house only has green tea. I did hear that I cannot consume too much caffeine during pregnancy, but I guess a cup or two is still acceptable. This is the only thing that can calm me down. Mr Akagi, are you fine with sour stuff?”
“Yeah.”
After hearing Koremitsu’s reply, Sora served the glass vessel filled with preserved food like paprika and dried plums along with the warm green tea.
“I made a little too much of these preserved food. If you don’t mind, please help yourself.”
Koremitsu received the fork that was handed, and moved the paprika to his mouth. It was a little sour as expected, but the aftertaste was refreshing.
“This…is nice.”
“Thank goodness.”
Sora gave a clear smile.
Sora was still a 11th grader in high school when she first met Hikaru, so she should be around 20 yers old. The reason why she gave a mature vibe however was not simply because of her appearance, but also because of her composed demeanour.
Hikaru’s mistress, Tsuyako, was also an elegant, graceful woman, but unlike her astounding elegance that appeared every single day, Sora had a refreshing, transparent presence that blended into the tranquil daily life. Her speaking style was also calm, and her distinct alto voice felt nice when heard.
Her face was certainly not extravagant, but the beauty mark at her eye looked exceptionally bewitching. Her smooth light colored hair, her white skin, her slender nape and the transparent, forlorn sidelong face evoked memories of Fujino, causing the heart to stir.
Though Fujino was of a completely different level appearance wise.
The atmosphere evoked by them felt so similar.
And Hikaru too watched that sidelong face with heartbroken, moist eyes.
Koremitsu felt a little hesitant within, but he decided to break the ice and say,
“Is the baby inside Hikaru’s?”
Sora let out a little gasp.
“I heard a few things about you, Sora, including what happened when you met this March at the chapel…if it’s the child conceived then, it’ll be 7 months.”
Koremitsu continued to look at Sora, and Hikaru too watched on with a grave expression.
Sora did not avert her eyes from Koremitsu’s body, and the latter saw that deep within her eyes was a soul filled with determination. She then straightened her waist, speaking with the composed alto voice.
“This is not Mr Hikaru’s child.”
“Then why were you looking at our school with such a forlorn face?”

“I was often said to have a face of misfortune. Perhaps it is due to this beauty mark. I so happened to pass by there, and there is no significance to that.”
“Hikaru said that you never dated anyone else before.”
“That is something I never said to Hikaru. It may not be the case after all. I only met Hikaru twice after all.”
While that certainly made sense, Koremitsu wanted to affirm as he looked over at Hikaru, seeing the latter lean over to say,
“Please do not try to bluff here, Sora! We only met twice, but I have been pursuing you all this time, and I know that you are a restrained person who wards yourself. You said you were at the church since young, and that you continued to study hard at college for the sake of working in the church. Did you not say when we met the first time “I shall continue to work for God for the rest of my life, and I shall be married to him.” You thought what you did with me was a sin to God, and that we should never meet again. The second time we did, you said to me “I definitely can’t do this sort of thing…I actually made myself in front of God twice…I’m afraid”…”
Hikaru’s eyes were filled with anguish, his voice filled with agony.
Perhaps it was because Hikaru understood how pure a person Sora was that he was skeptical of Sora’s words.
And Koremitsu wanted to convey Hikaru’s words to Sora, saying,
“Hikaru said that you are not a frivolous woman, Sora. He said that you wanted to marry God.”
Sora’s eyes narrowed.
Koremitsu had no idea what to make of the ambiguous expression, whether she was holding her tears back, or whether she wanted to smile.
“Tell me then. If it’s not Hikaru’s child, who is the father?”
He did not notice any male items in this apartment, and even though the child would be born a few months later, it would be strange not to notice signs of a man’s presence entering and leaving the apartment if the father was around.
Sora gently placed her hand on her chest.
It was a gentle, tender action that caused Koremitsu’s heart to pound.
And then, Sora gently raised her lips, showing a peaceful smile before speaking with a distinct voice,
“The father does not exist. This is the child of an angel.”

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“Sora…is a woman resembling the broom tree.”
Hikaru was walking beside Koremitsu on the dirt track leading towards the school, and spoke with a crestfallen face.
—This is the child of an angel.
With Sora concluding such words with such honest eyes, he could no longer ask further, and left the house.

He was sweating profusely under the sweltering summer, his throat parched as ever. The cries of the cicadas seemed to come from nowhere, overpowering Hikaru's voice from time to time.
"The Kokin Wakashū included the poem by Sakanoue no Korenori 'As the broom tree that grows by the lowly hut on Sonohara Plain, manifest to the eye, but beyond arms' reach are you, my love'…this broom tree distinctively resembles a broom hanging, and can be see when viewed from afar, but cannot be seen from up close. The poem itself is born from this legend. The people that cannot meet no matter how close they are…the people who vanish when nearby despite being visible from afar…like the broom tree, do you not wish to meet me…this poem depicts such an agonizing cry."
Hikaru hung his head, the eyelashes casting shadows in his eyes.
And the cicada chirping got louder.
"After I first met Sora, I woke up in the morning, only to find that she vanished, leaving me with only a blue gray cardigan that resembled the color of the sky during a rainy day, and my body was filled with tenderness…the body scent, warmth and weight surely existed, yet they vanished like an illusion…leaving behind a coat akin to a veil."
The young naked body of Hikaru woke up clad in a female cardigan, basked in the clear morning sun that shone through the chapel's windows, and was left forlorn, a sense of loss.
The memory caused Hikaru's expression to be clouded with agony.
"It was the same during the winter…when I woke up, Sora was no longer around as expected, and the shawl that was as white as snow wrapped me within. No matter how I tried to meet her after that, I was unable to. No matter how much I seek, yearn and angst for her, I could not grasp…like the tree in the legend…this aspect…really resembles that person."
The sunlight at the end of summer was really dazzling, and the sweat continued to trickle profusely no matter how he wiped it off, yet Hikaru's eyes were gloomy.
The sight of Fujino's melancholic sidelong face and Sora's forlorn sidelong face overlapped, inadvertently causing Koremitsu heartache, and he asked with a clumsy voice,
"Is Sora your replacement for Fujino?"
Hikaru however had his head hanging as he shook it, saying,
"No, that is not the case. The back silhouette of hers is similar to that person, and that did cause my heart to throb. Sora however is Sora, and no matter whether it was the 1st or 2nd intercourse, I was saved by Sora. I really wanted to spend more time with him.
"Did you make a promise with Sora?"
"No. Sora did not wish for a promise."
Hikaru lamented with a teeny-weeny voice.
"When I proposed that I would make a promise with her, she replied that she hated promises as they were definitely things that would never be fulfilled."

And then, he frowned as he looked over at Koremitsu.
“So I made a promise with her that one day, I would make a promise with her. That was a promise that would definitely happen no matter what. Sora merely smiled back skeptically, and never accepted this one-sided wish of mine…but to me, this has always been an important promise!”
The words contained Hikaru’s thoughts regarding Sora.
Surely Sora was an important woman to Hikaru
(It’s his first time though, so I guess she’s really special.)
But like the woman whom Hikaru loved most, the woman who took Hikaru’s first did not accept his thoughts.
“I suppose…Sora would definitely hide this from me and raise the child alone even if I am alive, and she will tell me that it is not my child, but an angel’s.”
Hikaru’s eyebrows sank further, before he soon lifted his head abruptly, saying with a powerful voice filled with conviction.
“It is a certainty that the child within Sora is mine, definitely. Is there anything I can do for Sora? I cannot embrace my child with my own hands, and I will only cause him to fall if I do so. Ahh, I cannot call for an ambulance either.”
“Calm down. You can’t even pick the kid up, let alone drop.”
“I cannot attend the parents meeting, nor can I appear in the photos of the seven-five-three, and I cannot play catchball.
“Ugh, hey, are you listening to what I’m saying!?”
“I feel so much despair thinking about how I want to install a vinyl pool in the garden, spraying water at each other using hoses, and I cannot plant seeds in the garden. That child is too pitiful to not have a father training him in riding a bicycle and doing back flips!”
“My dad never planted seeds with me in the garden, and he never trained me how to do backflips, but I’m not unfortunate in any way.”
After hearing Hikaru’s lament, Koremitsu too began sighing for some reason.
“Okay okay, I know you’re worried sick about Sora and that kid. If there’s anything I can do, I’ll help think of it with you.”
But though he said so, Koremitsu did not know anything about children…
After a while, Koremitsu finally arrived at school. He grimaced as he passed through the school gates, and arrived at the entrance, only to find Asai standing in front of him with an imposing pose.
“Now then, how long do you intend to keep me waiting?”
“Ack, I forgot.”

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(Akagi said that he’ll be late, but when does he intend to come to class? 3rd period’s already over.)
Honoka was feeling anxious as she stared at the seat beside her.

(Who’s that woman we saw in the morning? She looks like she’s older than us? A college student? An office lady? What kind of relationship does she have with Akagi?)
He skipped classes the moment the 2nd semester began, and gave chase with such ferocity.
(What does he have with that person?)
The delusions continued to emerge in her mind, and her heart was pounding so much it was about to explode.
She stood up, walked out of the classroom, and headed to the entrance.
How many times had it been on this day?
Honoka would make her way to the entrance whenever class ended.
(That Akagi could have at least sent me a mail.)
And just when she was grumbling away, she noticed the red hair.
(Akagi!)
She was about to rush over to him, but was shocked.
Standing with an imposing posture in front of Koremitsu was the student council president Asai Saiga. Surrounding her was an aura that could freeze all existence, and she glared at Koremitsu heinously.
“Were you trying to run away? This is not your own problem alone.”
She seemed to be saying something.
“I’m not running away. What about class?”
And Koremitsu muttered back with a scowl.
“It is fine niot to attend class.”
And with those words, Asai strode forth, seemingly wanting to drag Koremitsu along.
And the latter arched his back, looking extremely peeved.
(What now? What just happened!? What’s with that ‘this is not your own problem alone’?)
And while Honoka was flabbergasted about what was going on,
“I have a feeling it’s a scoop.”
Hiina Oumi of the news club popped in abruptly, showing her face.
“Wah, Oumi. You again?”
“Let’s go now, Miss Shikibu.”
Her large breasts bouncing about, she gave chase after Koremitsu and Asai with a bounce in her steps,
“Wa-wait—”
And Honoka too let out a shriek as she too gave chase.

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“So I say, that’s just a misunderstanding on your part.”

Koremitsu was facing Asai in the student council meeting room, explaining gruffly.

“The child inside Hikaru’s stepmother is not Hikaru’s.”

“How can you be certain about this? Hikaru has always loved that woman, and that woman has been evading him, reminiscing about him. When she returned to her hometown in March, he went out of his way to visit her. It is not strange for anything to happen at that point, no? Ever since he returned from that place, Hikaru had been acting eccentric.”

“But that is not the case, Asa. I did go to her house to meet her, but I was chased out because I was deemed a hindrance.”

“Hikaru told me that he did meet that woman before, but he was chased out. There’s nothing that happened between him and his stepmother.”

“When did Hikaru tell you this? Your first meeting was after you enrolled in this school this year, no?”

“Well…to put it, it was a short time, but we had quite the deep talk regarding our lives….”

Asai looked skeptical as she glanced aside.

“It is likely Hikaru lied to you to hide this secret. This is such a significant issue, and if revealed, will cause a massive commotion in the Mikados.”

“So I say, that’s not it. That’s not Hikaru’s child.”

He let slip because of Asai’s stubbornness, and the latter’s eyes showed a sharp blade-like glint.

“That’s?”

She hissed.

“Does Hikaru have **another** child?”

Koremitsu felt his shoulders shiver.

(Ack, this is bad—)

“Calm down, Koremitsu. It will be trouble if this is revealed to Asa. Try to mislead her calmly.”

(Calm down? How—)

Either way, he decided to keep his mouth shut and nonchalantly avert his eyes. However, that action caused Asai to be filled with belief.

“Is that so? Say it, when did it happen? Where? Who is the one pregnant? When is the due date? Which hospital? Who will be adopting the child? Have you thought about all that?”

Asai raised her eyebrows as she leaned forward, bringing her face close.

“H-hey, your face’s too close, Asa.”

“Do not try to mislead me! You too have to bear responsibility for this!”

Asai grabbed Koremitsu by the shirt and pulled him over, causing the tips of their noses to be practically touching each other.

Her face too showed the look ‘you are going to bear this responsibility and raise this child with me’.

“You are mistaken again, Asa! Koremitsu does not need to bear this much responsibility! He is not at fault here! Sora got pregnant because I failed my duty as a man!”
And Hikaru was yelling away hysterically.
At that moment, the door opened. Hiina and Honoka tumbled inside.
“A-a kid? Akagi…!?”
“Mr Akagi got the president pregnant! Wow, now this is a big scoop!”
There was a speechless Honoka, whose eyes were widened,
And a frolicking Hiina, yapping so loudly her voice echoed down the corridor.
And Asai’s face was flushed red as she left Koremitsu.
“What are you saying now! That is incorrect! Please correct it at this moment!”
She yelled,
“This is all my fault…even if my heart was completely wounded, I should have thought about the girl. A gentleman should have manners to have that thing in his pocket at all times. I had so many packets of those cute, aromatic things I bought in my house.”
And Hikaru, standing beside a dumbfounded Koremitsu, lamented.

Chapter 2

By the next day, news of Koremitsu impregnating Asai had reached the entire Heian High School Affiliate.
No matter where he went,
“I heard that the delinquent king made the Matriarch Asa pregnant.”
“I heard it’s been 4 months now.”
“Is it true that the Matriarch Asa threatened the delinquent king to get married with her?”
There were such whispering that caused Koremitsu much consternation.
And Tōjō,
“So you are the type of man to act early, you bastard…!? The thing about you being on bad terms with Asai is all a fake!? I still have no understanding however what is good about Asai, no, before that, what does Asai see in you, you bastard, in other words, what sort of development caused **this event**, no this is truly a coarse way of asking. My apologies, please forget about that. Everything that happens between man and woman is really beyond what I can imagine. Asai is still a woman after all. Hah! Are you thinking of doing such incorrigible things to Aoi too! Never with Aoi! Not Aoi!”
Was threatening him,
“Congratulations, Mr. Akagi, do you mind asking Miss Asai whether she wants paper diapers or cloth diapers?”
Tsuyako too teased him. And Beni Hitachi, the pen pal from another school he met during summer vacation, sent him a mail, stating,
“Mr. Akagi, is it true that you’re going to get married? There’s rumors of that the student council president of Heian Academy did it with the red-haired delinquent king circulating around in our school like crazy. Does this have to do with you?”
And inside the classroom,
“I-I-I-I-I-I-I do believe in you.”
Though she had a change of hairstyle, Michiru’s hairstyle did not as she stammered, and Honoka, sitting beside him,
“Akagi’s kid…Akagi’s kid…”
Was muttering a mantra with hollow eyes.
During the break, Asai sent him a mail that was filled with murderous intent,
“Ignore what anyone else say at this point. If you dare any anything unnecessary, I will kill you.”
Nonetheless, she was unable to hide her usual poker face whenever they met, and she was pouting her lips, blushing.
“That Matriarch Asa is all *dere* here!”
“That Matriarch Asa’s stomach contains the delinquent king’s baby after all!”

The commotion got increasingly chaotic, and there continued the vicious cycle of Asai gritting her teeth, giving a murderous look of wanting to eviscerate everyone.
That was merely the commotion that happened before lunch break.
(I didn't do anything that would have made her pregnant…)
Making his way back, Koremitsu was too tired to even raise his eyebrows that he slumped into the chair. Hikaru, right above him, was either having his hands clapped together or his head lowered.
"A-Akagi…I can believe you, right?"
Honoka, who was entranced in her own world, suddenly turned his face to Koremitsu and stared at him as she said that,
"!!! Of course."
"Y—yeah. There's no way Akagi and the Matriarch Asa would…do such a thing…"
One had to wonder what she was thinking as her face went beetroot.
And while even Koremitsu was blushing,
He spotted a delicate, pretty girl with long black hair at the corridor, seemingly looking for something.
Aoi!
She looked extremely pale, her shoulder shivering slightly as she peeked into Koremitsu's classroom. Once their eyes met, her shoulders jerked in shock as she showed a feeble, hesitant look, seemingly wanting to say something as she looked back at him.
Koremitsu immediately stood up and went off in Aoi's direction.
"Akagi!"
Behind him, Honoka let out an unreliable voice.
Once Aoi noticed that Koremitsu was headed in her direction, she averted her eyes, intending to leave in a hurry.
"Miss Aoi, please wait."
Hikaru pleaded with a desperate expression, and Koremitsu, in his delirium, grabbed her arm without a care.
Aoi was shocked.
And Koremitsu spoke with a serious tone,
"You came here wanting to tell me something, right? I got some things to say to you too, Aoi. Do you mind being with me?"
And so, he lowered his head as he held a thoroughly skeptical Aoi by the hand, heading to the roof,
Within the shade formed by the overbearing sunlight, Koremitsu let loose of Aoi's hand. She looked at her feet, and let out a little whisper,
"I…Asa…Mr. Akagi's child…erm…"
"I don't have a kid with Saiga, and it's not mine."
Koremitsu was worried if Aoi was fretting too much over this matter.
While the relationship between Aoi and Asai showed signs of recovery during the fireworks festival Tsuyako organized, the relationship was still

delicate. She probably let her thoughts run too much when she heard that Asai was pregnant with Koremitsu's child or something.
She was the only one Koremitsu had to explain matters to no matter what. Naturally, it was difficult for him to mention that the child within Sora may be Hikaru's.
But after hearing Koremitsu's words, Aoi's face went pale.
"If it's not your child, Mr. Akagi…then, does it mean that it is Hikaru's?"
Both Koremitsu and Hikaru widened their eyes in unison.
Both Asai and Aoi were probably too sensitive when it came to Hikaru's matters.
Well, Hikaru himself was probably the worst form of existence to cause others to immediately assume 'pregnant with a child = is it Hikaru's child?'.
(Isn't this all your fault for saying that all the girls are pretty flowers, wandering around and having fun?)
"Is the child within Asa's belly Hikaru's?"
Aoi leaned forward, the silky black hair blown by the breeze at the roof.
"Mislead her, Koremitsu!"
"Th-that's not it! It's another woman who got pregnant!"
"Another…! Then is it true that Hikaru has a child!?"
"Ahhh, you revealed it Koremitsu!!!!! Was that actually deliberately? Hey, was it deliberate!?"
Hikaru was in the air, hugging his head as he writhed.
You're blaming me now!? Isn't this all because you're fooling around too much!? Koremitsu lambasted in his mind as he saw Aoi's teary face, muttering away what do I do now
The tears slowly seeped out from her eyes, and she quivered.
She probably heard all sorts of rumors of Hikaru fooling around when the latter was alive, but it was too much for her to hear that he had a child. She could no longer chide him for he had already left.
Well, the culprit was certainly beside him, writhing around. Fortunate or not, she would no longer be able to see that person or hear his voice,
(Damn it, you're always causing me trouble.)
He was extremely furious at his Casanova of a friend, but still, he placed his hands on Aoi's shoulders.
And Aoi widened her eyes in shock.
"The thing is that Hikaru may have a kid, and that's because he's that sort of person! The one he chose in the end is you, Aoi! His feelings for you aren't a lie!"
"What Koremitsu said is correct, Miss Aoi!"
Hikaru too was seemingly revived as he clenched his fists and nodded.
"Hikaru broke up with the other girls so that he can protect and be with you alone, the important person to him. Please believe that about him!"
"Please believe Koremitsu's words here, Miss Aoi!"
Hikaru too was serious.

Aoi initially stared at Koremitsu in surprise, and then, the eyes were gradually hazed with anguish,
“…I understand. If you say so, Mr. Akagi.”
She whispered, but she did not seem convinced.
Her red teary eyes were lowered slowly, and she remained silent.
“…”
The strand-like black hair swayed fleetingly, and Aoi looked more fragile than before, to a point where anyone was able to send the skepticism and sadness emitting from her slender shoulders. Seeing this, Koremitsu felt really depressed.
I’ll be the one to protect her.
For an instance, Koremitsu felt this feeling surge within him.
That was something he could never say to Hikaru or Aoi.
♢ ♢ ♢
It was after class, and with the complicated feelings he got from Aoi, Koremitsu went off to Sora’s apartment, still feeling perplexed.
(I guess I feel this way, guilty…definitely because of Sora.)
Aoi was never able to united with Hikaru when he was alive.
But Sora was entrusted with Hikaru’s child.
And because Hikaru died, that was something Aoi could never ever do…
One had to wonder who was the blissful party between Aoi and Sora, and as a boy, Koremitsu would never know…
He stood in front of the door, the intercom rang, and Sora exited.
“Why are you here?”
She looked extremely shocked.
“I got something I want to be certain of.”
He responded with a sullen, serious look, ostensibly plotting something as he looked hesitant, and walked in.
“Come in. It’s no different from yesterday.”
Koremitsu placed a plate of pickled paprika that was served on the plate in this room filled with the aroma of green tea and paprika, gulped down the tea, and stared at Sora, saying,
“You said that the father of the baby is an angel, right?”
“Yes.”
“But an angel can’t give you living expenses, and he can’t change diapers. How do you intend to raise him when he’s born? What about college?”
“I intend to take leave from college.”
Sora answered without a second thought, her gentle tone not showing any signs of being worked up.
“I do intend to do some part-time translation work involving English and Chinese. The Church will also assist me however they can. I’ll get past this by being a little frugal.”
“But.”
That’s still too hard for you, while Koremitsu was worrying about this.
“I am a frugal person.”

Sora tried to pacify Koremitsu with a cheerful voice,
“With 100 Yen, I can make 3 cans of side dishes, and theChurch speaker will help me with the recycling. The water used to wash rice especially can be reused quite a lot. I was very good at that when I was still in elementary schoo.”
The sincerity in her expression was never frivolous, and her thorough explanation was such that there was no way to refute it.
“Did your family say anything, Sora?”
Sora smiled.
The mole beside her eye became more apparent, and there was a tinge of loneliness reaching him,
“I didn’t let anyone in my family know about this. Father has just started a new family. I can’t be bothering him now.”
“Sora’s mother died when Sora was still in elementary school. I suppose her father was remarried.”
Hikaru chimed in with melancholy.
(I see…she doesn’t have any family to rely on…)
At this moment, he remembered Yū, now residing in Australia.
Back then, Yū had her money supply cut off due to her father’s remarriage, and she lived alone in that tattered apartment.
But unlike Yū, who seemed to be disappearing like a dream, he could feel that Sora’s tone, attitude and heart were exceptionally sturdy. The room was as neat as how he saw it the previous day; the alluring sunlight shining in from outside the window.
Sora herself took up a piece of pickled tomato, and popped it into her mouth.
“It’s sour.”
She curled and twisted her lips,
“I suppose sour is the best taste after all.”
“Sora, the pickles.”
“But in fact, I really am not good with sour things. However, once I got pregnant, I saw everyone eating a lot of sour things, so I thought it may be good to do this. Any mother would wish for their child to have something nice to eat after all. There is a certain person who wrote a thesis saying that a pregnant lady should be eating honey-covered bean jam and fruit 3 times a day. Thinking about that, I think that I can eat anything.”
“…Stop with the nonsense.”
Looking over at the kitchen, he found many cans of dried plums and radish pickles,
“You don’t like eating them, but you made quite a lot.”
Sora narrowed her eyes, her smile this time tender and warm.
“I am a klutz of a mother who dotes on her child very much.”
She answered with a delighted alto voice.
Koremitsu’s heart was filled with a little tension.
And Hikaru’s eyes too were filled with heavy tension.

To cushion herself, Sora reached her legs wide and sat down, getting into her usual posture as she began to knit a sock.
“This sock too…is already the 5th pair. I accidentally knitd too many of them. The child will soon grow up, so after I knit a pair, I have to make a larger pair the next time.”
The clear sunlight at the end of summer shone upon the natural, long hair, reflecting a golden color. The eyes lowered were that gentle, and the fingers holding the sewing needle were white and slender.
“It seems that when the child is born, I’ll be knitting a sock as large as Santa’s Christmas bag.”
She continued to knit one step at a time, gently doing so with love for the fetus in her tummy. The threads were a clear blue, and a cheerful sky gradually cleared as the white fingers weaved the golden needle about.
“I really am a klutz of a mother here.”
The tender words were oozing with earnest love, causing the heart to tighten.
She probably was not confident in raising a child alone…
Yet there was nary a panic to be felt from Sora. One could see her knit socks for the child that was to be born with a blissful expression. From time to time, she would pat her hand on the tunic above her belly, smiling gently.
A gentle yet determined profile.
There was no sense of sadness from her at all, and furthermore, one could sense a solemnness from her—
Koremitsu endured the sweet yet bitter feelings in his heart as he watched her.
◇ ◇ ◇
(The only ‘mother’ I know of is one that keeps crying every time…)
On his way home,
Koremitsu heard the chirps of the cicadas as he dragged his feet, recalling the scene of his mother leaving home when he was still in elementary school.
—I’m really sorry, Mitsu.
—Sorry.
The mother who continued to sob with her head lowered.
Feebly apologizing ‘sorry’ over and over again whenever she saw Koremitsu’s face.
Though she was not too fond of going out, and often lingered in a corner of the room, making small, felt things, ostensibly engrossed in her own world…the thin, slender silhouette looked increasingly tragic.
—I’m really sorry, Mitsu.
There was the petite figure holding the large luggage bag, gradually departing under the dim road ights in the middle of the night.
And on the other side was his young self, standing and clinging to the window, praying for his mother to return.
That wish was never granted.

Koremitsu continued to scowl, and Hikaru did not disturb him. All this time, Hikaru had been ponering silently and solemnly, seemingly recalling something once he heard Sora's decision.
"I'm back."
Koremitsu reached home, opened the sliding door, and the white Lapis poked its head out from the living room.
Lapis did not ask where Koremitsu was, merely staring at him coolly with its Lapis-colored eyes.
Recently, whenever Koremitsu returned home, Shioriko would come scurrying out and greet him, shouting, "Welcome back! Big brother Koremitsu!" She however did not appear today.
In contrast, Koharu, wielding a kitchen knife, poked her head out from the kitchen.
"Welcome back, Koremitsu. Go clean up the bathroom before dinner."
It was Koharu's style to leave her red hair unkempt, and wear a T-shirt and trousers with messy hems. She would wear a short apron around her waist whenever she was working in the kitchen.
"Got it…" he answered, and then, he asked, "Where's Shiiko?"
"We ran out of soy sauce, so she went out to buy it with the old man. She said that the old man came along as its too dark and dangerous, but it's just a 10 minute trip to the supermarket, and isn't the outside rather bright too? He said that he's going out to buy some *Go* magazine in the meantime, but the issue this month's already sent over, and he even yapped saying that he saw it. I'll say he's one clumsy grandpa doting on Shiiko rather than bonehead."
She answered with a stunned look, shrugging her shoulders,
—I really am a klutz of a mother here.
Sora's soothing alto voice rang in his ears, and his heart ached yet again.
And suddenly, he asked Koharu, who was headed to the kitchen,
"Erm…when someone's pregnant, is there something I can get or help out with?"
"Huh?"
Koharu frowned hard, contorting the tip of her nose, and she glared furiously,
"Did you make some Missy pregnant or something here?"
And she pointed the kitchen knife at Koremitsu's nose.
"I didn't!"
"Really? That lady who came to eat with us that day looked like she had a lot on her mind."
"You're talking about Shikibu? Shikibu's my classmate—anyway, I didn't do anything, whether it's to Shikibu or any other girls."
I can't stand being mistaken for a scoundrel who made a girl pregnant by my own family! He denied this with all his might.
And so, he asked,

“It’s not me…an acquaintance I know of is going to give birth. The kid’s dad died…and there were some things she couldn’t leave it to in the family. Well, I guess giving birth is quite the big thing…huh?”
“Of course. It’s a matter of life and death.”
Koharu put the knife down as she concluded. And she probably thought of something, for she asked,
“How many months now?”
“7 months.”
“I see…”
Koharu sank into a long, deep thought.
She probably recalled the time when she gave birth. Perhaps too, as a woman in a similar circumstance, she was worried about Sora, who was to give birth to a child alone. The child Koharu gave birth too was soon taken by the father after the divorce, and she never saw him again. It was said that she found out about her husband’s infidelity when she was pregnant, and adamantly proposed a divorce. Either way, it was not a happy pregnancy.
Finally, with a scowl, Koharu spoke up,
“I’ll come up with a list later stating all the preparations needed before a pregnancy. If you feel that there are needs you really need, take as much as you want.”
“O-okay.”
◇ ◇ ◇
(Akagi’s reading stuff about child raising again…)
A few days after the furor over the pregnancy caused by Koremitsu Akagi. Koremitsu was reading a book titled ‘First labor and child raising’ solemnly, one page at a time, and Honoka, seated beside him, was fiddling with her cellphone as she watched on tentatively,
“The classmate I’m interested in made a girl pregnant □ □(□´Д`□) □□’
What do I do now?
By Hono Hono.”
She left this message on an internet imageboard without any anonymity. The ones answering this question would probably be torn on what to do. Even Honoka would be troubled by anyone asking her similar questions on her own website.
And the moment she thought of that, she received her message on her blog address.
“Purple Princess, please hear me out!
I think I may be pregnant here! (T□T)
And it may not be my boyfriend’s kid, but B’s kid, whom I have an affair with!Σ□(□д□`)□. Do I lie and say that it’s my boyfriend’s kid here, or do I ask B for compensation and abort the kid? I’m so troubled by it that I can’t sleep for nights □∩ ∩□
I’ve been without my period for 3 months already.

My weight has increased by 10kg.
At the rate this keeps up, I feel like I'll give birth tomorrow.
Purple Princess, please give me some advice here + ~ □°(>o<)°□"
(~~Like I would know what to do there!)
And also,
"Purple Princess, I'm troubled here.
I bore a baby, but my boyfriend wouldn't recognize it.
He actually said 'Is this really my kid'(;△;)
What do I do now?(□Д`)□*
(Why are these messages coming one after another~~~!!!)
Actually, she recalled what she updated on her mobile phone noel a few days ago, that a rival to the heroine Natsuno appeared, pregnant with the lover Takuma's child, and had an impulse to slam her head on the table.
(I accidentally added this into the novel because of the shock about Akagi!!! Ahhhh, what do I do now anyway?)
She hastily erased the urge to beat her face up in her mind as she reverted to the love expert Purple Princess, answering the questions,
"First, go buy some medicine to check for pregnancy, and see if you're really pregnant. Try summoning your courage and visit the nearest drug store □°`▽`°□"
"I think that if you really love your boyfriend, you'll actually want to give birth to the kid(□ω□)
If you actually believe in your feelings, try saying to your boyfriend 'this is the kid of my beloved, you, and I'm not willing to abort it. I'm going to raise it alone even if I have to do it alone'.
The most important thing is not to say it with a hateful tone, but to say it with a determined smile.
If the boyfriend says 'I'm sorry, I'll be a good dad and allow this kid to be born', it'll be all okay`"(@^▽^@)/
But if he's to leave it as it is, and think that it's too inconvenient, I'll say it may be better for you and the baby inside not to give birth□□> O <□□
I hope that you'll have a good outcome (□+□)
Once she was done sending the messages, she looked over at the imageboard she posted on, and found a few replies,
"In this case, I think you can only give up now."
"This guy you like is just someone you're really infatuated with, isn't it, Hono Hono? I think it's better for you to find another guy you're more fond of."
"A student, and he already made a girl pregnant? What's so good about such an irresponsible guy here?"
After looking at the replies in front of her, Honoka felt sharp stabs in her heart, and felt regretful that she asked for help here.

(L-look for another guy I'm fond of—I-I"m just thinking of Akagi's matters here. But Akagi's just thinking of that girlfriend he impregnated here—ahhhhh seriously, my mind's going crazy!!)
At the very least, she understood that Akagi's partner was not Asai.
2 days ago, a teacher said to Asai 'do you mind coming to the counselling room', and in front of the other students,
Is something the matter? Is it that I have to take a virginity test here or something?"
The latter asked with a frigid tone and expression capable of freezing the entire classroom over.
After hearing that, the teacher retreated slightly,
"N-no, I guess there is no need after all. Just a misunderstanding."
Such a rumor immediately spread through the school, and at this point, everyone knew that Koremitsu's partner was not Asai.
In other words, anyone who was to casually spread such malicious rumors would definitely receive a calamitous amount of vengeance if Asai were to hear about it, so everyone was probably terrified of such a prospect.
Furthermore, the delinquent Koremitsu and student council president Asai had such differing positions and personalities.
And in the end, everyone concluded that nothing happened between those two.
However, the rumor remained as to who Koremitsu actually impregnated, and this was the source of Honoka's troubles.
(If it's not the Matriach Asa, who else can it be? Oumi once said that Akagi's been to a college girl's apartment many times…don't tell me it's the girl he gave chase to that day!?)
That definitely had to be the case.
At that moment, Koremitsu was practically in a trance, and paid no heed to anything other than the girl.
At this time, he paid no heed to the surrounding stares and rumors, reading intently the books on how to raise children.
From her seat afar, Michiru had her head tucked in, shocked as she watched on.
What exactly did Michiru think about the rumors of Koremitsu impregnating a girl? Would her attitude towards him cool down a little because of this incident?
(I…)
Honoka too reevaluated matters from her own perspective.
She was still terribly shocked that Koremitsu's child was to be born soon. But he looked so serious holding the books about child raising. To Honoka, this was the forthright attitude of Koremitsu Akagi that really moved her.
(Akagi's just a high school kid…and he's already taking responsibility for what he did here. He wants to be a dad…)
The world would be harsh on him, and it would be a difficult, arduous ordeal.

(But that’s because…Akagi’s serious.)
Her heart throbbed, Honoka shut her cellphone and lifted her head.
(I can’t leave him alone like this after all!)
◇ ◇ ◇
“Akagi!”
Honoka, seated beside him, fiddling with the phone with her eyes raised, looked over grimly as she suddenly stood up.
(Wh-what now?)
Hikaru, floatng above Koremitsu’s head, was too taken aback as he leaned forward.
Honoka slammed her hands onto Koremitsu’s table.
And then, she gritted her teeth, shouting,
“I’m going to help you as your Heliotrope!”
◇ ◇ ◇
The next day,
There was a pile of baby magazines laid out on Koremitsu’s table,
“My friend’s older sister gave birth last year, and sent a pack to me saying that these aren’t of any use now. She said that the ‘Eggs Club’ is a magazine to be read before labor, and the ‘Chicks Club’ is to be read after labor. There’s a summary of the methods selected by the hospitals, the fees for pregnancy tests and so on. Looks, the summary for baby foods here is really detailed, right?”
Honoka laid the books out as she gave Koremitsu a forced smile.
There was a similar situation before.
It was a similar expression to the one back in the first semester, when Koremitsu was reported to be suspected of being a lolicon, Honoka brought him to a karaoke suite, and suddenly laid out a pile of gravure magazines with a blushing face to read with Koremitsu, trying to correct his lolicon tendencies—
(This again…Shikibu?)
Koremitsu understood that Honoka was doing it for himself. He was grateful to her for preparing all these revealing gravure and baby magazines and researching (?) on them with him, and was sheepish about it.
(But something just feels wrong about it.)
“This baby food here looks delicious, isn’t it? It’s called fruit udon. Eh, shred the cooked udon, add some diced peaches and bananas, mix them together, and cook them together. Add in some snapper shreds, and you can how it as an ordinary dinner. Hey, Akagi, which one do you want?”
“…I-I’m bad with baby food.”
And the child was yet to be born.
“It’s not good for a pregnant lady to not move at all. It looks like they can do a little yoga. How about this cat pose? Relax your limbs, tuck your tummy in and raise your buttocks. I say you should try this in the Japanese Dance clubroom after school.”
“…Why do I have to do gymnastics here?”

The moment Koremitsu got up,
“Akagi, where are you going?”
“To the changing room for PE next. Anyway, you’re to go as well, right?”
“You can’t do intense sports like soccer and basketball here! What if the belly is wrecked here! Try enduring a bit and do that cat pose!”
“I say, I’m not the one giving birth here! I’m not going to do either that cat pose or the dolphin pose here!”
It had been like this since morning.
“Miss Shikibu really is conflicted between her feelings of wanting to wish you well as a father, Koremitsu, and the unbearable feelings that you actually became the man for another woman.”
Hikaru earnestly muttered,
(I say now. I’m not the father here! Aren’t you the papa here! Go do that cat pose!)
Koremitsu glared aside at Hikaru, muttering in his heart,
“Akagi, look at me. Listen to what I say here!”
Honoka held Koremitsu’s face, and forcibly tilted it towards herself,
“I say, Shikibu.”
“Wh-what?”
Honoka’s hands remained on Koremitsu’s face, probably because of Koremitsu’s serious look back at her.
“I’m really grateful that you’re helping me out with the kid, but there’s no need to be so serious here, right?”
“I-I’m not being so…”
Honoka stammered.
Ah, did I say too much here? Koremitsu too had his voice stuck in his throat.
Honoka pried her hands away from Koremitsu’s, and with a complicated look of feisty and weakness, she lifted her head at Koremitsu,
“I-I just want to help you out here…Akagi.”
After hearing this reply, Koremitsu felt an aching in his chest.
“If you say that you want the kid born, I want to help you with that, Akagi.”
“I said already that it’s not me…”
While his shoulders were slumped weakly, this time, it was Michiru who came running towards them,
“M-Mr Akagi! I-I-I’ll like to help you in getting the kid born like Hono. I-I’ll keep watching until your kid’s born.”
She exploded with these words that left Koremitsu all the more lethargic.
“These are my little tokens, a baby towel, underwear, diapers, and warmers.”
She stuffed these things, packaged in all kinds of colorful ribbons and wrappings, into Koremitsu’s arms.
“I-I-I heard that warm baby diapers are better than cold ones here.”
The serious class representative seemed to have done her own research.
“…Thanks.”
At this point, he could only say these words.

Later, at noon break, Tōjō and Hiina appeared one after another.
“It looks like it is not Asai’s child. I was wondering why would there be a man willing to be with that Asai here, but I suppose it is a pity. I assumed incorrectly that Asai became a mother, but since I did ask others to send it over, do give it for that child to use when it is warm. These are customized baby bottles, customized bibs, and a silver spoon.”
“It is expected to be born in winter, right, Mr Akagi? This is a classical music CD for the fetus. Make sure to listen to it; it’ll calm people down. These are some dried sardines here. Hope that a strong baby will be born after eating these.”
She laid out the items one after another.
“All of them are good people.”
Though Hikaru did say this with a gracious feeling, Koremitsu, being blessed “Please have a healthy baby” with his classmates staring at him, was not the direct beneficiary.
During noon break, he evacuated to the Japanese Dance Research Club with a lunch box in tow, only to find Tsuyako there.
“Miss Shikibu and Miss Hanasato came to me asking to come up with a party celebrating the birth of your baby, Mr Akagi. You really are beloved here, papa.”
And she teased him.
“I don’t want a party or anything like that. Don’t think of adding on to the mess here, senpai.”
“Oh ho ho, the more you say you do not want it, the more I feel like doing it.”
“Spare me already. The kid’s going to be born, but it’s not mine.”
“Oh my. I heard that you are devoted to researching on the baby books.”
“That’s because…this kid doesn’t have a dad, so I thought I could at least do something here. It’s not like I’m not involved however.”
After this exchange, Tsuyako’s face darkened,
“Is it…Hikaru’s child?”
Koremitsu was left speechless.
(Ack, I blurted it out again…!)
And Hikaru’s face showed a feeble smile incapable of putting up any resistance.
“Is that so? Hikaru’s child, is it? Ah, why did I not notice it before? There is no way you would cause a girl to be pregnant, Mr Akagi, but since you are researching on books about babies, I cannot think of any reason other than it being Hikaru’s child.”
After saying all these in excitement, trails of trails suddenly appeared on Tsuyako’s face,
“Sen-senpai!”
After seeing the crystal clear tears trickle down before his eyes, Koremitsu, inapt at dealing with women tears, immediately panicked.

Hikaru too was embracing Tsuyako by the shoulders saying, *“Tsuyako. Please do not cry anymore! I am sorry!”* looking extremely lost. Naturally, Hikaru’s hands were unable to touch Tsuyako’s shoulders, and his voice could not reach her.
“What do I do now? I am happy now.”
“Eh?”
Hikaru widened his eyes.
Tsuyako placed a hand over her face, showing a little opening,
“Hikaru’s child would actually be born. I assumed that I would never be able to see Hikaru again, yet the child that will inherit Hikaru’s blood will be born…will he resemble Hikaru in looks? Is he a boy, or a girl? I am chuffed to bits here. What do I do here, Mr Akagi? I really…really am delighted…my tears cannot stop…”
Her shoulders quivered as she continued to sob,
Tsuyako, never to show her own suffering and tears to Koremitsu or anyone else, was so overwhelmed with joy and tears, and her expression was etched deeply in Koremitsu’s heart. Hikaru too looked ready to cry without tears as he embraced Tsuyako tightly, his cheeks carassing hers.
Tsuyako continued to sob as she said,
“Thank you for informing me of such an important thing.”
“No…the kid’s not born yet, actually.”
And while Koremitsu sat down shyly and fidgeted,
“Please allow me to assist with the baby. I shall have to order a customized baby cot, a customized baby car, and a customized music box.”
She said to him,
“Eh?”
◊ ◊ ◊
It was after school. Sora looked a little annoyed when she saw Koremitsu visit her apartment again, this time with a large number of baby items in both hands,
“There is no need for you to visit me every day, you know.”
She said as she brewed some tea.
“Hey, don’t do that. I’ll do that!”
Just when Koremitsu placed the items down and frantically ran off to the kitchen,
“You really like to worry here.”
She beamed serenely.
The moment he looked back, the thin fragrance of green tea and grapefruit spread from her hair, to all over the room.
“It is good for the child inside if I move about a little.”
“But, if there’s a little mistake.”
He did realize that he was a little overly paranoid, but Koremitsu memory of pregnancy was fuzzy as he was still in elementary school when Koharu gave birth, and he never was pregnant himself. He was always worried if the child would pop out from the belly if anything was to happen.

Sora again was wearing a loose tunic. The belly itself did not seem too overly obvious, or perhaps Sora herself was slender, for even though it had been 7 months, there was no obvious change to the belly. This however caused Koremitsu to worry that a little impact would hurt the baby, and cold sweat trickled down.
Thus, whenever Sora stood up, squat down, or tried to walk,
“I’ll do it.”
“You can just sit down, Sora.”
“Wait! Don’t touch!”
He ended up standing, squatting and surrounding her from behind,
“You really like to worry, Mr Akagi.”
And every single time, Sora would respond with a troubled smile.
Koremitsu was not the only one experiencing ‘labor’ from up close, for Hikaru too was no better,
“Sora, you cannot move such a heavy thing. Ahh, if you squat down now, the burden on the belly will—”
He would dither,
And while the two boys were left flustered, Sora’s eye, with the mole beside it, looked a little relaxed,
“I’m fine.”
She answered with a delightful alto voice.
And then, she gently knitted socks for the child, placing the hand on the belly from time to time to calm them down.
But anyhow, Koremitsu would end up seeing his mother’s silhouette over the scene in front of him.
“Hey…aren’t you worried, about giving birth to a kid alone?”
Recalling the sight of his sobbing mother who was always curled every day, his heart continued to ache as he asked this stiffly. Sora placed her hand gently on her tummy, answering with a calm down,
“This child continues to encourage me.”
“You love…this kid?”
“Of course.”
There was no hesitation in the gentle voice.
And she narrowed her eyes blissfully.
While thinking about why Sora would show such a blissful look, Koremitsu felt conflicted emotions of joy and sadness, his nose itching.
(Did my mom put her hand on the tummy and smile gently like this when I was in her tummy..?)
Did such a thing happen before?
He could only remember the sight of his mother crying.
Lead astray by his past memories, Koremitsu’s emotions collapsed into darkness, and he clenched his fists.
“Actually, you don’t have to be so worried. You still have your studies and club activities to worry about, right? It seems that you came earlier than yesterday.”

“Well, actually, the 6th period’s self-study, so I came scribbled some stuff on the printouts and came over.”
Suddenly, his forehead was hit with a smack.
“I say, this isn’t a good thing, you know. Self-study is still part of the lessons, so you have to stay in the classroom until the very end. If you dare slack off again, I won’t let you inside again.”
She puffed her cheeks, her tone similar to a big sister telling off a child. Her face then sizzled, and the area around her mole was gradually dyed red.
“Ah, I’m sorry. I mistook you for my long lost brother, so I.”
She muttered shyly.
Koremitsu remained stunned as he stared back at Sora.
It was the first time he was lectured so gently. Whenever Koharu got angry, she would end up swinging her arms and legs at him, and his mother who left house kept crying and apologizing, never once telling off Koremitsu.
Due to the soft hit, the heat on his forehead gradually dissipated.
Feeling surprised and bittersweet within, Koremitsu recalled the time when he was still a child, probably loving his mother.
(Wh-what stupid things am I thinking about here?)
He immediately felt embarrassed by it, but for an instance, he was unable to escape the gentle touch that surrounded him,
“Mr Akagi…?”
A worried voice rang at the ears of Koremitsu, who was lost in his own world.
Stunned, Koremitsu looked back,
“D-don’t ever slack off in class again, okay?”
She lowered her reddened face, curtly telling him off.
And then, she raised her head tentatively, easing the eye with the mole beside it as she watched Koremitsu. The tender expression of a mother protecting a young child caused Koremitsu’s heart to wench further.
“But I’m Hikaru’s friend here, so I want to help you out in his place, Sora.”
“Didn’t I say that this isn’t Hikaru’s child?”
She lowered her eyes, her expression ostensibly telling ‘what a troublesome kid’. To him, this image of of her looking a little teary reconciled with the image of his mother who left home.
Unable to find the source of his stinging emotions, Koremitsu muttered,
“Hikaru always yapped here and there about promises and such, so there definitely is one, isn’t there? Let me be the one to fulfill it then! Please tell me anything you wanted Hikaru to do when he was alive.”
He wanted to something for Sora.
Not just for Hikaru’s sake, but for himself.
He wanted to do something for Sora, who was protecting the fetus in the tummy, who was to become a mother.
However…
“There’s nothing.”
With a tragic expression, Sora answered,

“I personally have no wishes for myself.”
Hikaru, having anticipated that Sora would reply as such, looked back bitterly at her.
Koremitsu too grimaced, transiting from the surrounding tender atmosphere to one where cold water was splashed upo him.
From the aroma pot rose the green tea and apricot fragrances Sora brewed, and the room was bright and warm.
I dislike promises.
Because they will never be fulfilled.
Sora once said this to Hikaru.
And she placed her hand on her tummy, narrowed her eyes as she smiled.
Her face was so peaceful, so wise, and so satisfied…
But Koremitsu’s heart tightened when he saw Sora’s expression suddenly vanish and gradually grow distant.
The petite image that gradually faded away under the street lights flashed by in his mind.
Hikaru too bit his lips tightly, looking at Sora with anguish.
◊ ◊ ◊
“…Kaoru, Izumi. I guess it is Kaoru after all.”
Once he got home.
Koremitsu entered his grandfather’s calligraphy classroom in his house, and with penbrush and ink, wrote out words on the calligraphy papers laid out on the writing table.
Hikaru was thinking of a name for the child, so Koremitsu accompanied him and recorded all the names Hikaru said.
“Kaoru (□).”
“Izumi (□).”
He wanted to write out the names with thick lines, but the lines just seemed so feeble and weak.
“I suppose it is best to have a child both girls and boys can use…for I do not know how long I can still remain on this Earth.”
And after muttering this,
“An-anyway, it’s still too early to start worrying about this, isn’t it?”
He vented out the emotions he kept within.
“Anyway, Sora is more important here. Sora was always like that; when I was in Middle school, she would go to Church every day, and I would not be able to meet her. Sora had a little brother in kindergarten back then, and I kept accompanying him, waiting for Sora to appear. I once requested for the little brother to sneak Sora some letters, but Sora never once replied to me.”
Don’t go about asking kids to do such things here! While Koremitsu was dumbfounded, Hikaru gave a sheepish look.
“I dated many girls later on, and understood a lot from them, but I have yet to understand Sora.”

The hushed voice, coupled with the lowered eyebrows, looked so heartbreaking; the lucid eyes showing anguish and turmoil.
“All the girls are like pretty flowers, needing the water called love to hydrate them, but no matter how much is given to them, they will never be satisfied. This is the path needed for them to bloom splendidly; as long as I am needed, I will give it all to them no matter how much it is. Sora however —did not need it.”
If you had wanted it, I could have given it all to you no matter how much it is; even if you want me to hold the blooming blue flowers by the river and fall in.
Hikaru definitely protected the women he loved with utmost might, and definitely watered them so that they would bloom fully.
Except for Sora—
“Why exactly did she reject my feelings and promises, and yet she accepted me? Girls would normally begin with ‘no’ at first, but they were never sincere about it. Sora’s ‘no’ is different from the other girls’–yet the arms that embraced me were so filled with love, so tender. Thus—I suppose Sora did not hate me…”
It was extremely rare that Hikaru finally concluded that there was a place for him in her heart.
(No, with this guy, I know that he’ll end up falling for himself if he meets himself in the eyes.)
In any case, perhaps it was a rare experience for him to be rejected by a girl after all.
Leaving aside his stepmother Fujino, Sora, who both accepted and rejected Hikaru, was an anomaly herself.
(She actually caused the harem prince Hikaru to show such a bewitched look…is there a chance that he never pursued any girls other than Sora?)
Fujino herself was a taboo.
But Sora, who resembled Fujino so greatly, could not be obtained no matter how he tried to pursue her. Even if he felt that he did enter her arms, she had already vanished before he realized it.
And Hikaru’s shoulders slumped as he continued,
“The first time we met, I said to Sora ‘you are like a Japanese Cypress, Sora’. Now that I think about it, that was not a good there. The next time we met, she said ‘I did see the Japanese Cypress, but it looks like a large, bushy moss ball, not a pretty flower at all.’, and I told her ‘that is definitely the Japanese Cypress. It can also be called the Hahakigi, but the fabled Hahakigi does not exist any more. I cannot explain very well what sort of plant it actually is, but it should be the same as the Japanese Cypress, with a thin, tender stem, and has a cute, round and lush shape of a broom, what a beautiful flower’. And once I said this ‘but it doesn’t have any flowers, and it’s not like a flower—”

There was heat in Hikaru's voice, and surely he told Sora these words so desperately in the Church at the beginning of March, when the piled snow had yet to melt.
"That is because the Japanese Cypress blooms as strangely as a ball of fur. The little fruits growing on the twigs can be eaten, and they are called the caviar of the fields. They do have a strange scent, but they are called 'flowers'."
He clasped his hands tightly, looking on like a puppy,
"So I said to Sora 'That is not the case. The Japanese Cypress is very beautiful, marvelous when the red leaves appear, like the coral reefs—so beautiful that I have to wonderful if the fabled Hahakigi was like this. Let us go look for it next time'. Sora however turned her head aside, telling me so forlornly 'I don't want to make a promise'. Argh, I really do not understand. Hey, Koremitsu. What do you know now?"
"How will I know anything even you don't know of?"
He growled back at Hikaru, who had his his head cuddled.
(Ugh, I don't know anything…about women at all.)
Why give birth to me if you're going to dump me…
He practiced on the papers over and over again his mother's favorite word so that he could give it to her on her birthday.
It'll be good if mom can be happy.
It'll be good if mom can smile.
With such anticipation filling his heart, he practiced over and over again.
And the words 'love', 'dreams', 'stars', 'hoped' littered the floor—
(I never gave a single one to her.)
Hikaru watched on worriedly, wondering what exactly happened as Koremitsu gripped the brush tightly, the latter's face froze as he gritted.
At that moment,
"Koremitsu."
Koharu came in.
"Didn't I tell you to come for dinner at 7?"
"Ah, sorry…it's that time already?"
Koharu glanced at the words Koremitsu word,
"What's with these words?"
"Ah, erm, the kid's name. I'm thinking about which one's the best right now."
"This isn't something you can decide, right?"
"Though you say that, I think it's good to have a backup. Ah, the Wakame and Shimeji mushrooms pickles you gave me aren't very sour, Koharu. She's glad to be able to eat a lot of it."
"Is that so…"
"She can't take sour stuff very well, but she's still trying her best…is this what a mother's about?"
"…"
"Taking tender care even before the kid's born."

—I’m really sorry, Mitsu.
There was Sora, who eased the corner of the eye with the mole, smiling gently
There was Sora, who had a blissful look as she placed her hand on her tummy.
And on that Sora was the image of his mother’s sobbing face, utterly contrasting Sora’s, the voice hoarse.
—Sorry.
“Are all of them like that…even my…”
Did my mom ever love me before?
Yeah, I want to ask her that.
Does she love her even if her life’s in danger?
Did I ever, love my mother?
But all the words remained stuck in his throat, becoming a pool of bitter saliva.
Perhaps Koharu knew very well what Koremitsu was about to ask. She curled her lips and scowled, remaining speechless.
“…”
Hikaru too stared at Koremitsu worriedly.
Koharu then sighed, and said,
“Your mom…got remarried again. Not with that teacher, but another guy again. You also have a little brother.”
Now that was the first time he heard about it
“You want to meet her?”
He felt a stab in his heart, and the images of his mother’s gloomy expressions appeared in his mind one after another.
“I don’t know.”
“Is that so?”
It seemed Koharu knew of his mother’s address.
For Koharu herself did have heart-to-heart talks with his mother in the past…
He recalled the sight of his mother embracing Koharu tightly, sobbing incessantly.
She threw out the little felt bear mascots she made onto the floor At that moment, they both had a long talk, and Koremitsu, who was still in elementary school back then, should have overheard them.
He was standing behind the sliding door, curled up as he listened intently on the surrounding movements.
At that moment, his mind was shrouded in darkness. His body was scalded by the hot water-like heat and pain.
(Yeah, back then, mom—)
Damn it! Stop!
The gradually awakening memories were severed by his heart.
Don’t recall any more.

The more he recalled it, the more his body was scalded and ached all over.
In an instant, Koremitsu closed his eyes.
Hikaru worriedly called out,
“Koremitsu.”
Koharu remained silent.
While Koremitsu gritted his teeth to endure the pain, scampering footsteps could be heard,
“Aunt Koharu, grandpa Masakaze’s prompting you for dinner. Shiiko too is too hungry here!”
Shioriko’s cheerful voice rang.
Koremitsu opened his eyes, and found the twintails swaying about, scuttling towards Koremitsu with a cheery face as she latched onto his arm.
“Come quickly too, Big Brother. Tonight’s dinner your favorite spicy Jjigae stew.”
Gradually thawing Koremitsu’s heart were the tender, warm arms and the innocent sparkling eyes that lifted with the head.
At Shioriko’s feet was Lapis, lifting its head as it looked up at Koremitsu, calmly purring away.
“Wait, Shiiko, you can’t take spicy stuff. What if you hurt your tongue again?”
“Don’t worry. It won’t be spicy if I add mayonnaise.”
“Mayonaise? That’s heresy.”
“It’s fine. Shiiko wants to eat whatever Big Brother Koremitsu eats.”
“Well then, I’ll try some mayonnaise too.”
“Yes! It’s delicious!”
The innocently beaming Shioriko, his petite stepsister, dragged him out of the calligraphy room.
Hikaru looked rather relieved as he watched Koremitsu, while Koharu looked on with an unchanging scowl.

Chapter 3

The next day,
Koremitsu's table was still surrounded with the usual buzz.
"Akagi, I heard that the most important thing in giving birth is the breathing! If the correct breathing technique is mastered, the kid will follow suit and come out! Someone uploaded the video onto the internet. I'll send the address to you."
"M-M-M-Mr. Akagi, they do sell something called a diaper cake in a baby shop. I bought one thinking that I had to show you this. Look, the towels, diapers and underwear are all packaged in a cake decoration, very cute."
Honoka and Michiru were holding baby magazines and childbirth supplies, taking turns to talk to Koremitsu. Also, even the second year Tsuyako was in Koremitsu's classroom.
"Hey, I do think this is good as a design for the baby cot. While there is some Japanese flair added, do you not think it has a modern feel to it? This one here is decorated by Italian lace; I really have a hard time picking. Which one do you think is better, Mr. Akagi?"
Honoka and Michiru were already attracting a lot of attention, and with a glamorous, stupendous beauty like Tsuyako beside Koremitsu, it attracted a lot more attention at this point.
The sight was akin to a garden of flowers suddenly popping out around Koremitsu.
"What's that? A harem?"
"I think I saw that before…like when Mikado was still alive."
"The harem delinquent, huh?"
There were murmurs from all around.
(Don't give me such a weird nickname here!)
Koremitsu hollered in his heart.
For some reason however, Hikaru was dressed in the clothing of a Persian Prince, floating in the air, looking moved as he said,
"Thank you all for thinking so much about my child."
Koremitsu did hear the depressing words from Koharu the previous day, but with the girls surrounding him, he was kept so busy that he did not have the time to brood over it.
(Seriously, these guys…)
Though he was grimacing on the surface, there appeared some form of relief from somewhere in his heart.
(Oh.)
He suddenly spotted Aoi standing at the entrance of the classroom.
Perhaps Aoi came to see Koremitsu, worried about Hikaru's child. She looked vexed and tentative as she peeked into the classroom, and looked flustered as she opened and closed her lips over and over again.
Aoi had been standing a little distant from Koremitsu over the past few days, and never once approached him.

On this day too, the moment she met Koremitsu in the eyes, her shoulders would jump slightly, and she would frantically turn her head aside, scampering off.
(That's a normal reaction, I guess…?)
It probably was difficult for Aoi to be like Tsuyako, sincerely delighted that the boy she loved would have a child soon.
Hikaru too looked on docilely as he whispered in anguish,
"Miss Aoi has a tendency for purity, so she probably is angry, hurt now. If I were still alive, perhaps she would ignore me for at least a year or so…"
After school, Koremitsu again paid a visit to Sora's apartment. There was a sweet, refreshing fragrance of green tea and grapefruit drifting in this neat and tidy room, giving one a sense of comfort and modesty. He spent the time looking at Sora, who continue to knit clothes, and sometimes even make paprika marinade.
Whenever he thought about Aoi, he would feel guilty about being together with Sora like this.
And intertwined in his thoughts were the pricks of his already remarried mother, the thoughts he was unable to express in words.
"Sora, you really don't have any wishes you want fulfilled?"
Koremitsu asked.
"None."
Sora immediately answered without hesitation.
"There has to be 1 or 2 of them. Like for example, live in a more spacious, luxurious house, or take a luxury cruise on a trip or something. Ah, I don't have enough money to pay for that if these are what you're thinking. If you're really thinking about that, I-I'll definitely think of something."
Sora cheerfully looked back at Koremitsu, who seemed to have taken the metaphor to the literal extreme, the smile in her eyes akin to one watching over a child with the wish 'I want to be the president when I grow up'.
(Ugh, she's not taking my words serious here.)
And a mesmerizing alto voice entered a blushing Koremitsu's ears.
"It takes a lot of effort to clean up a house that's too big, and I get seasick easily, so I'll pass on the house and cruise."
"I-in that case, how about eating lots of what you like and wearing beautiful dresses or something?"
"If I eat a lot of what I like, I'll end up disliking it in the end. While pretty dresses are nice to look at, it definitely isn't convenient to move in them if I do wear them."
"Then, how about doing nothing for a day? I'll do all the housework that day."
"Koremitsu, that is a privilege for Mother's day."
And Hikaru chimed in.
"Fo-forget I said that."
Koremitsu blurted in a panic, and Sora chortled.
"—Fufu."

And while Koremitsu was left embarrassed,
“Thanks for thinking for my sake here. You really are a good kid, Mr. Akagi.”
She spoke with a motherly tone.
This left Koremitsu’s face sizzling more and more, and he was rendered speechless.
“This is to be expected, Koremitsu. Even I was treated like a child by Sora here.”
Hikaru consoled,
(Wait, will anyone do such things to a kid!?)
Koremitsu retorted quietly, looking very remorseful.
In this silent room, the cicadas could be heard chirping.
“It’s been lively nowadays too…”
Sora looked out of the window, muttering.
It wasn’t a particularly interesting topic to talk about, but Koremitsu was relieved,
“When I was young, I did look for the shed skins of cicadas…in the summer.”
And he blurted.
At that instance, Sora’s eyes became melancholic.
“What happened to the shed skin?”
“I put it in a plastic bag and left it on the table, but a breeze unexpectedly blew it to the floor, and I stepped on it accidentally, crushing it.”
“Is that so…that’s a pity.”
There was a tinge of loneliness in those words.
The mole under the eye seemed to become a tear.
Koremitsu too became gloomy as he recalled how he gathered the shed skin, and remained silent.
Both of them remained silent until the cicadas could no longer be heard.
“I’ll come by tomorrow.”
Koremitsu told Sora just as he was about to head back.
“Please don’t make promises. I really dislike making promises.”
She said with a phlegmatic voice.
While on the way back.
The sun continued to set as Koremitsu walked through the narrow alleys between the houses, his emotions clearly bleak.
From beside, Hikaru whispered,
“…Sora’s reaction was a little strange when you talked about cicadas.”
“…”
“You too…have bad memories about cicadas, do you not?”
And while Hikaru expressed his worry, Koremitsu brusquely answered,
“It’s nothing…it’s just like what I told Sora. I gathered the shed skins, but they were accidentally crushed , that’s all.”

However, the one who accidentally crushed the skins was not Koremitsu, but his own mother. After that, his mother merely continued to weep and apologize to Koremitsu, “I’m really sorry, Mitsu”, just like that…
(Even till now, I still feel hurt whenever I think about that person. That’s definitely because I still haven’t given up hope, I guess.)
He continued to hope that the mother who abandoned her child still had that little bit of love for him.
—I’m really sorry, Mitsu
The mother who was always sobbing.
If he could have smiled cheerfully, perhaps his mother would be able to stop weeping.
And thinking that, Koremitsu tried his best to show a smile, trying his best to raise his lips. All he showed however were bloodshot eyes, a stiff face, and he was unable to smile.
Koremitsu never smiled again ever since his mother left him.
And he could not smile.
“Hikaru…your mom told you to ‘keep smiling’, right?”
Koremitsu asked Hikaru with a deep whisper, and Hikaru answered with a forlorn, clear voice,
“Yes…she told me that I could be loved by everyone if I could do this, that I would not be alone.”
—Hikaru, you have to keep smiling no matter what.
If you do that, everyone will love you.
If anyone does anything bad to you, fill your heart with love and smile back
She repeated these tender words to the young Hikaru over and over again
And just as Koremitsu could not smile, so Hikaru became a boy who could not cry.
Hikaru’s sickly mother already knew that her end was nigh, and out of her love for her son, she imparted these teachings to Hikaru, who was to be left alone on this world.
—What does it feel like to let the tears flow?
Koremitsu recalled the expectant tone Hikaru used to ask and the lukewarm expression he used when he quietly muttered this, his heart wincing.
The atmosphere brimming towards Autumn, the nights would quickly become frigid and forlorn. The crimson sunset flaring just a while back was gradually dimming.
“…Was your mom someone who always smiled?”
“I suppose…my mother was my father’s mistress, and his legitimate wife came looking for trouble, so mother must have been suffering…I do not recall mother showing any face other than a smile however.”
Hikaru’s expression, even his lips, were smiling as he talked about his mother. However, his sidelong face looked as tragic as ever.
Will the day when I can smile come?
Will the day when this guy can cry come?
(How exactly does it feel to smile?)

Koremitsu recalled the girls around him who had the cheerful smiles,Shioriko, Tsuyako and Honoka, and inadvertently started to wince within.
(Hm? Who's that guy?)
At this moment, Koremitsu noticed a little boy of 4th, 5th grade standing in front of his door, fidgeting uncomfortably as he looked around Koremitsu's house.
(An elementary school kid…? Shiiko's acquaintance?)
"Hey."
Koremitsu called out, and the boy jolted in shock before turning around. His hair and clothes were tidy, and it seemed he was a well raised child. He had a cute and wise face, but the lips pouting due to tension gave a conceited impression.
At the same time, Koremitsu seemed to have an impression of seeing the child before, curious that the boy resembled someone he knew.
And the boy was utterly terrified to have a savage looking red haired high school student talk to him.
To hide that little insecurity, his lips curled and winced more than before.
"Anything you want with us?"
Koremitsu asked, and the boy widened his eyes in shock as he stared intently at Koremitsu.
"Ah, wait!"
The boy then ducked under Koremitsu's arm, and sprinted off, soon disappearing around the corner.
"What was that about?"
"Is that not a boy who has a crush on Shiiko? He definitely came to confess to her, met a terrifying big brother, and had to run away."
"Sorry for being a scary big brother."
Koremitsu looked on sullenly at the place the boy disappeared to.
(He does look like someone I know…either fully, or somehow…)
During dinner, Koremitsu recounted the elementary school boy he met in front of the house, and how the boy immediately paled the moment he spoke up, and ran away.
"No way, that's definitely a boy who has a crush on Shiiko here. He actually came all the way here like a stalker. Thank goodness Big Brother Koremitsu's there to chase him off.
Shioriko puffed her cheeks before saying it cheerfully, and Masakaze roared,
"A stalker!? That won't do, Shiiko. Do you have any preventive buzzer or a spray? I'll make a notice on the board to get the neighborhood council to take note, and send any suspicious people to the police station."
And Koharu, upon hearing this, scowled, chiding,
"You're saying to arrest an elementary school kid if you find him? That makes you look like your Alzheimer's worsening. Stop it already."

“What’s with that? You think of your own dad as an old man with Alzheimer’s? That’s why I say women…this eggplant miso soup’s too bland.”
“It’s not like it’s better when saltier. Your tongue will go numb if you eat stuff too flavorful. You’re a lost cause like Koremitsu, but what’ll happen if even Shiiko can’t figure out the fine tastes? Anyway, stop complaining to the one who worked hard to make dinner!”
“Seriously, Aunt Koharu, grandpa Masakaze. Stop fighting already.”
It was only after Shioriko stopped them did the duo snort and look aside.
◇ ◇ ◇
The next day.
In his quest to eat alone in peace and avoid the assaults from Honoka and the rest of the girls, Koremitsu went about looking for a suitable place in school. He then found Aoi, squatting alone at the garden deep within school. It seemed she was brooding over something alone, for she had yet to eat her lunch.
(I wonder if Aoi will run away if I try talking to her…)
Unwilling to leave Aoi alone, Koremitsu slowly approached her.
“!”
However, Aoi looked shocked as she suddenly got to her feet.
And Koremitsu too was taken aback.
A figure appeared from behind the building, and it was a youth wearing some refined looking glasses, his slender shoulders tilted forward,
(Kazuaki!!)
Hikaru’s older brother, Kazuaki, had a strong obsession with Aoi. He had a frivolous smile on his face as he stood in front of Aoi, and spoke to her,
“Good afternoon, Aoi.”
Aoi in turn remained standing still due to fear.
“Miss Aoi!”
Hikaru yelled in a panic, and Koremitsu dashed off towards Aoi, hollering,
“Back away from Aoi! You perverted big brother!”
“Mr. Akagi…”
A pale looking Aoi turned to look at Koremitsu.
Upon seeing that there were tears welling in Aoi’ eyes, Koremitsu was further incensed,
“What are you doing here!? I’m going to smash your head into the wall if you dare do anything to Aoi!”
“Deary no. I had to wonder how many days my face swelled after you punched me. I could not help but despair whenever I look into the mirror and see the band-aid on my nose, wondering what would happen if I were to have a band-aid on for the rest of my life. I really had the urge to die back then.”
Kazuaki shivered in fear, covering his face with his hands.
“If you’re so worried about your face and don’t want me to wreck you, lock yourself in your home safe and don’t ever show me that goody-goody smiling face.”

“Hau! So mean. I just decided to pay an occasional visit to my beloved Alma mater. I just so happened to find Aoi here all lonely and forlorn, so I just wanted to comfort her.”
“Like hell I’ll believe your words, you two face crossdressing sicko!”
Kazuaki sighed, looking convinced that he was unable to get through to an uncouth man. His expression then changed, showing an earnest smile.
In turn, Aoi was taken aback, and grabbed the hem of Koremitsu’s shirt.

“There is no need to be so tentative, is there? If I had a 100% interest in you back then, Aoi, it can be considered to be 50% now.”
And with a condescending look, Kazuaki stared back at Koremitsu, speaking with the same sweet voice as Hikaru’s,
“For it does seem that Aoi here is not Hikaru’s most beloved.”
Aoi’s face froze.
Hikaru gasped, and a stunned Koremitsu glared back.
(This guy, did he…)
Did he already figure out who Hikaru’s ‘most beloved’ is?
Is he intending to tell Aoi the truth?
“Such a tragic lie it is~ He would actually do things that are supposed to be done with the woman he loved most after all. On the other hand, he always treated Aoi like a child, a little sister.”
Aoi’s face became increasingly stiff, her face paler than before, and the fingers grabbing Koremitsu’s shirt were shivering slightly.
“Please do not say anymore, Mr. Kazuaki!”
Hikaru yelled in an anguished over.
And just when Koremitsu was about to slam a fist into Kazuaki,
“Oh yes. I heard that Hikaru’s child will be born in winter. The mother seems to be a college girl, I heard? A single woman wanting to raise a child in such a cramped apartment? I am moved.”
The latter’s expression became increasingly leery as he continued on.
(Raising a child alone in the apartment…did this guy mistake Sora for Hikaru’s ‘most beloved’!?)
“How will the child turn out to be like? I suppose, as Hikaru’s child, that child will inherit Hikaru’s splendor after all, no? It will be wonderful if it can be born.”
Hikaru too realized Kazuaki’s misunderstanding, but he was tense for a different reason.
(Sora will be in danger if Kazuaki has his eyes on her!)
A chill went up Koremitsu’s spine.
“I really am looking forward to it. Can the child be born soon? I will have a niece soon, and I will take care of the child, making sure not to devour it.”
The warm breeze whiffed Kazuaki’s hair, causing his tender voice to scatter in the wind. An alluring glint flashed by his eyes, and the lips that slowly curled up were instantly red like blood.
That was the embodiment of the spider.
Rokujo.
A shiver went up the spine, through Koremitsu’s entire body, and he stopped moving forward.
“!!Kazuaki, you…!”
Evading Koremitsu’s outstretched arm that was aiming for the shirt, Kazuaki pulled his distance away.
“Bye now, Mr. Koremitsu, Aoi. Please do not show such terrifying faces the next time we meet.”

After saying such words with a grin, Kazuaki departed.
Aoi was standing there, shivering.
The narrowed eyes oozed tears, and Aoi tightened her lips and continued to blink, trying to stop the tears.
Aoi here is not Hikaru's most beloved.
Hikaru had a child with the woman he loved most, and that child would be born in winter.
That was what Kazuaki said.
One had to wonder how hurt Aoi was to be mocked by Kazuaki's voice that was as sweet as Hikaru's.
"Miss Aoi. Even if that was the case, you were my final choice. I am willing to use my entire life to ensure your happiness, Miss Aoi."
Hikaru desperately pleaded beside Aoi.
And Koremitsu too tried to placate Aoi, his heart filled with the impulse to embrace her shivering shoulders.
But if Kazuaki were to set his eyes on Sora instead, she and the child inside her would be in danger.
Koremitsu had to hurry to Sora's side.
With a hoarse, desperate voice, Aoi murmured to Koremitsu.
"Even if Mr. Kazuaki did not say so…I do know that Hikaru has a very special person to him."
And Hikaru, eavesdropping, was left dumbfounded.
"N-no matter how unaware of what is going on…I do know about that at least…so please head over to that lady as soon as possible."
Hikaru lowered his head deeply, looking extremely apologetic as he whispered to Aoi,
"Sorry for being unable to bring you happiness, Miss Aoi. I am sorry for dying alone personally."
With a heartbroken feeling, Koremitsu too lowered his head,
"Sorry."
After saying that, he sprinted out.
His heart ached increasingly as he thought of how Aoi was left alone, crying by the tree alone.
"Ah! Mr. Akagi!"
A petite girl with short curls came running over to him on the corridor.
It was Michiru.
"I've been looking for you. Erm, there's a shop selling imported baby products, and they all look very cute. I thought I want to go with you, Mr. Akagi…"
"We'll talk about that later. I'm in a hurry."
Koremitsu glared as he said that to Michiru, causing the latter to flinch. He left Michiru behind as he went sprinting out of the school gates.
(Damn it! That bastard Kazuaki! If I could only knock him out before he could say anything more to Aoi!)

Koremitsu's mind was in a mess, whether it was due to his rage at Kazuaki, the complicated feelings for Aoi, or his worry for Sora, and it was suffocating him.
If something were to happen to Sora.
If something were to happen to the child within Sora.
He was supposed to be the one protecting Sora in Hikaru's place!
Sora was so earnestly endearing the child that was to be born!
(How can I let Kazuaki, that pervert, do something to the woman precious to Hikaru, to Hikaru's kid!)
Hikaru, following sidelong, looked tense as well; he looked blurred due to the sweat seeping into Koremitsu's eyes.
Koremitsu was left panting furious once he got to Sora's apartment, his bones creaking all over as a wail rang deep within him.
He pressed the bell,
"Sora!"
And the moment the door opened, Koremitsu yelled her name, sprinting into the apartment.
Sora widened her eyes in shock.
Koremitsu had a look at Sora's face and the tummy hidden under the fluttering tunic. Once he was sure Sora and the child were fine, he continued to ask, still worried,
"Sora, did anything happen? Did anyone come by? Were you threatened or attacked? Is there anything troubling you? If something's to happen to you, I…"
Koremitsu's tears were oozing out, unable to hold in the intense emotions. He knew a man would not be one to cry easily; however, was it really good for him to not be able to cry in this situation? He was utterly furious at how weak he was.
And Hikaru, right beside him, collapsed on his knees as he smiled,
"Thank goodness…Sora is safe."
Sora in turn embraced Koremitsu gently by the shoulders to calm him down, leading him into the room, asking,
"What's the matter? Did something happened, Mr. Akagi?"
Koremitsu however remained in a frenzy, and he obeyed Sora's advice to sit on the cushion, easing his panting.
"I was really worried about you, Sora. So I came running over here…if…if anything were to happen to you…and your kid…what am I supposed to do?"
Koremitsu's eyes were entirely red as he continued to rattle on. And so, Sora suddenly reached her white, slender arms forward, embracing Koremitsu within.
Just like a mother embracing a child.
Something warm and tender touched Koremitsu, engulfing him gently within.
"Calm down, Mr. Akagi."
An amicable alto voice rang, the voice akin to a lullaby.

“I’m completely fine here, and so is the child.”
She then continued with a soothing, serene voice.
“Hey, it’s alright.”
The sweet aroma of green tea and the refreshing whiff of grapefruit blended and fused together, causing the torrent of emotions swirling within Koremitsu to subside.
Even though he had the experience of being embraced before, Koremitsu never experienced the rare sensation of being embraced in the arms.
He did not feel his heart race, and neither did he feel flustered and embarrassed. He merely felt extremely moved to feel such peace and healing.
At this point, he finally understood how Hikaru, utterly battered within, was redeemed by Sora, not just on the surface, but also personally experiencing it.
He felt fortitude, tenderness and relief from Sora, and it felt like she would accept and retain everything about himself, protecting him.
That was the charm he had never experienced from Hikaru’s other flowers, and he felt himself drowning within.
In the distant past, if that mother of his had embraced him like this when he was still immature, perhaps this might be the feeling.
The peace within his heart and the desire to fawn about coagulated together, and he did not want to leave; he wanted to continue remaining like this.
He felt very awkward when he wondered what expression Hikaru would show when looking at him, but he could not refuse Sora’s embrace, and he could feel his heart pounding in Sora’s chest.
At this moment, the intercom chimed.
Not once, but twice.
(Kazuaki’s here!?)
Koremitsu got up in a panic.
And Hikaru too looked wary as he stood beside Sora.
“Mr. Akagi?”
“Stay there, Sora. Don’t move.”
Koremitsu said, and approached the door with a skeptical looking Sora behind him.
The intercom rang again, and it seemed the person outside knew that there was someone inside, practically ordering someone to open the door as soon as possible.
Koremitsu narrowed his eyes, and looked through the peephole.
Standing there was…
“Eh…Saiga?”
All he saw in the peephole was a peeved looking tall, lanky girl with long black hair, Asai Saiga.
Koremitsu opened the door, and Asai’s usual blade-like stare was looking back at him.

“Is Hikaru’s partner inside?”
She interrogated Koremitsu with a heinous voice,
“Move aside.”
And shoved him aside before he could answer,
“H-hey, Saiga—”
“Asa? Why are you here too?”
Hikaru, standing right beside Sora in the apartment, too widened his eyes.
Koremitsu did not tell anyone, including Asai that Sora was one of Hikaru’s mistresses, and she was living in such an apartment
The rumors of Asai bearing Koremitsu’s child had vanished completely once Asai coerced the teachers into giving a diagnosis that she was innocent.
She did not send any messages to Koremitsu over the past few days, probably because she was afraid of starting another misunderstanding, or that she was left red faced after she herself started off that sort of rumor in the first place. This caused the impression that Asai would not look for him.
If Asai wanted to, it would be easy for her to investigate who Hikaru’s partner was.
Furthermore, Koremitsu had been visiting Sora’s apartment over the past few days, and it was obvious as to the reason why.
Asai seemed extremely peeved, displeased that Koremitsu hid the fact about Sora’s pregnancy from him.
Though she may seem cerebral and rational, Asai was one who easily let her emotions overwhelm her, and there was nothing anyone could do when she was like that. Her cousin, Hikaru, naturally knew about it, and Koremitsu only understood this recently.
The moment he saw the seething look on Asai’s face,
(This is bad.)
He immediately had this premonition.
“Wait, Saiga.”
“I had enough of your waiting already.”
Asai retorted with an icy voice, and stood in front of Sora.
Sora too got up, and asked with a skeptical look,
“Erm, who may you be?”
“Hikaru’s cousin, Asai Saiga.”
Sora widened her eyes,
“Mr Hikaru’s cousin?”
“You must be Miss Sora Semigaya, right? I heard that you are pregnant with Hikaru’s child, am I correct?”
“Hey! I said already…”
“That was too straightforward, Asa.”
Koremitsu and Hikaru frantically tried to stop Asai, but she could not hear Hikaru’s voice, and Koremitsu’s pleas fell on deaf ears.
Sora gave a frown on her little forehead, the mole under the eye looking exceptionally forlorn by the moment.
With a scowl, Asai diverted her eyes to Sora’s abdomen.

“It seems that you have not decided on the hospital yet. What do you intend to do? If it is really Hikaru’s child, you cannot allow the child to be raised in such a cramped apartment. Also, there is a need to do a DNA test immediately after the child is born.”
And Sora frowned harder than before.
She then covered her belly, ostensibly shielding it from Asai’s eyes as she stared back.
That feisty expression was the exact same as when she raised the broom high, unlike the feeble, pacifist woman image.
And that infuriated Asai.
“Do you understand your…?”
Current situation? Before she could say those words, Koremitsu grabbed her arm, and forcibly dragged her out of the apartment. He closed the door, and led her downstairs.
“Let go of me, Mr Akagi.”
“Calm down already, you! It’s not your call for the hospital or a DNA test here!”
And Hikaru too looked on in dismay from the sidelines.
Asai waved Koremitsu’s hand off, chiding,
“That child may be Hikaru’s, and I cannot leave it alone like this, can I? You too, do not act on your own without consulting me.”
A scathing criticism was in the eyes. Perhaps Asai was utterly infuriated that Koremitsu never voiced out his problems to her.
And Koremitsu reflected a little upon the feelings Asai must have felt, lowering his voice as he apologized,
“I’m in the wrong here, but Sora said that the child inside her was not Hikaru’s, and she intended to give birth to the child alone. I don’t want to cause a huge commotion until she can understand where we’re coming from. I want to do something for her knowing that the child may very well be Hikaru’s, and I understand that you can’t remain calm. However, the one being the mother this time is Sora.”
“…”
Asai closed her lips tight.
But even so, she still reflected on her actions, and did not retort back as she kept her lips shut, pouting in dissatisfaction.
“Anyway, I’ll definitely look for you when I need your help. Can’t you just wait this for the time being?”
Koremitsu earnestly pleaded with Asai.
“…I am not going to bother with you if something is to trouble you and you do not look for me.”
Asai turned her face aside, saying it so stiffly.
“Ohh! You’re rather reliable, Asa.”
“Do not call me Asa…”
Those words she always repeated stopped midway through. For some reason, her face was slightly flushed,

“It is fine for you…to call me Asa.”
“Heh?”
“If it is you.”
Asai peeked at Koremitsu’s face, and quickly showed a poker face…or so one would think, before she eased her face and curled her lips into a smile,
“I shall wait for your call then.”
After saying that, she departed.
(Wh-what the? She said that I can call her Asa…is it a special discount day today or something? She just felt a lot better out of a sudden.”
“I am amazed, Koremitsu.”
Hikaru, being sidelong, looked extremely impressed as he said,
“I have no idea when exactly were you so adept at handling Asa.”
“Now what are you saying out of a sudden?”
“Perhaps I may have to start consulting you sometime down the road.”
“I really don’t know what you’re talking about here.”
Such a conversation continued as the duo scaled the stairs, returning to Sora’s room.
While wondering how to explain Asai to Sora, he opened the door.
“I’m coming in, Sora.”
And then, the scenery that appeared to Koremitsu caused him to freeze.
Hikaru too gasped.
The nose could scent upon a strong fragrance.
Scattered all over the floor was a large amount of tea leaves and scattered grapefuit zest.
The fragrance of Japanese tea and grapefruit continued to fill Sora’s apartment.
Sora did tell him before it was a a air freshener she brewed, and that she kept them in a jar after making them. When using them, she would scoop it out with a ladle and put it in an aroma pot.
But the tatamis were in tatters, not because the jar fell accidentally, but because she slammed it down onto the floor.
Still cuddling her belly, Sora lowered her head as she knelt on the tatamis.
Her left arm was bleeding, and the tatamis were stained with it. Spinning by the side were the fragments of the broken cup.
That cup had a Japanese design.
And Sora had always used it to brew tea.
The baby magazines and items Koremitsu brought were also scattered everywhere.
(What’s going on? What just happened?)
It was just several minutes ago when Koremitsu’s group left the house.
And in such a short time…
“Sora!”
Hikaru’s yell caused Koremitsu to recover,
And the latter dashed over to her,
“Sora, what happened! Are you alright? You’re bleeding—”

“The cup broke…I cut myself when I tried to clean things up.”
Sora said with a trembling voice,
The thin hair was in a mess, strands all over her forehead, sticking on her face. The lips continued to shiver, and the shoulders and hands were quivering slightly.
“You cut your arm? Got to treat it fast. First we have to clean the wound…”
“No need!”
Sora waved Koremitsu’s arm off.
“No need to clean the wound.”
“But…”
Why was it like this?
Why did Sora lower her head so timidly?
Did Sora cause the mess in the room?
Feeling completely befuddled, Koremitsu’s head was sizzling, and the contrasting cold was swimming throughout his back.
Sora continued to remain kneeling, seemingly determined not to move.
There was blood from the wounds on her left thumb and index finger, dripping onto the tatamis.
“Sorry.”
She suddenly said this with a hoarse voice.
She twisted her body, lowered her head deeply, and continued to sob.
And so,
“Sorry.”
She continued to repeat the word over and over again.
“I actually should not have given birth to this child. I let my little sister take my place! It’s because of me that my sister, my family…I’m an ugly person who has no right to bear this child! I’m sorry, sorry.”
—I’m really sorry, Mitsu.
The words Sora struggled so hard to eke out, coupled with the dripping tears and shivering look, caused Koremitsu to be overwhelmed with a tremendous pain and shock all over his body.
—Sorry.
—I’m really sorry, Mitsu.
Sora’s profile and covering face became one with Koremitsu’s sobbing mother, causing a shrillness in his ears, his vision shaking.
—Koharu, I….
There was his mother sobbing as she leaned on Koharu.
—I’m a terrible mother….
There were little felt bears thrown all over the floor, each with their limbs broken.
His mother’s pale hands were covering the face.
There was red blood seeping from Sora’s face.
There were tears trickling down her face
The stinging fragrance.

Koremitsu's feet were wobbly, ostensibly abandoned in the viscous darkness.
"Pull yourself together, Koremitsu! Sora is not your mother!"
If not for Hikaru's holler, Koremitsu's inner heart could have vanished into the tatamis.
Awakened by Hikaru, Koremitsu picked up the towel meant to celebrate the baby's birth, soaked it in water, wiped Sora's arm, and used another towel to wrap the wound.
The sobbing Sora let Koremitsu handle her wounds as she continued to weep incessantly,
"Sorry…it's all your sister's fault. I'm sorry…"
And those words became softer and softer.
Soon after, after exerting all the strength in his body, he loosened his shoulders, and stared blankly at the items scattered all over the tatamis.
After seeing the broken fragments, the thin eyebrows sank in depression, and the eye with the mole near it dampened again.
"…It was the one cup I choose with Mr Hikaru."
She whispered.
And she stared at the cup.
For some reason, Hikaru was taken aback when he saw it.
At this point, Sora too continued to reminisce the past.
Koremitsu slowly tidied the room, for he was afraid that he would sink into that viscous darkness again if he did not move.
While cleaning up the magazines, he found a postcard.
And there was a photo attached to it.
There was a woman wearing a Holland, or Swiss tribal clothing, an elegant apron with red frills around the hem of the skirt, holding a baby in the hands.
However, neither she nor the baby could be seen.
For the places above the neck of the child were cut off neatly by a pair of scissors.
Koremitsu found something amiss, and froze. Hikaru too went beside Koremitsu as he peered in on the postcard, his expression becoming somber too.
There was a message written in marker ink at the bottom of the postcard.
"I really miss you, big sister. From Ogi."
(Big sister? So the woman in this photo is Sora's little sister?)
Hikaru too continued to stare at the photo.
And at this moment, Sora looked down at the cup in her hands, still looking forlorn.
She never stood up until the end.
I'm fine by myself here, so it's best for you to head back now, Mr Akagi.
After she pleaded, Koremitsu left the apartment.
The night got darker, and Koremitsu lowered his head as he returned home.
I let my little sister take my place!

I’m an ugly person who has no right to bear this child!
Sora’s yell continued to linger in Koremitsu’s ears.
And the sight of her continuing to apologize and sob remained for a long time.
“Koremitsu.”
While Koremitsu walked on with heavy steps, Hikaru whispered,
“I never did choose a cup for Sora.”
◇ ◇ ◇
That night, Koremitsu gave Sora a call on her cellphone, but she never picked up.
And he was left unable to sleep, opening his eyes umpteenth times in the night. After seeing the darkness in Hikaru’s eyes as he stared at the void with an empty look, Koremitsu was left further depressed, and closed his eyes again. Such actions repeated themselves until the next morning.
Once he got to school, Koremitsu gave a few calls and messages to Sora, but the calls never got through, and the messages were never replied.
Why exactly did Sora start sobbing away and become frenzied? Like a completely different person?
Did Asai’s visit cause such a great shock?
It was true that an ordinary woman would have been intimidated by Asai being uppity and giving commands.
But the impression Sora gave Koremitsu over the past few days was that she was a composed, firm-willed woman. She really loved the child in her belly, saying that she had nothing to fear raising a child alone through her own strength. Koremitsu would not believe that Sora would simply be rattled just because of some harsh words from Aai.
Hikaru too must have felt the same thing, and it was apparent from his gloomy face that he was thinking about something.
(I shouldn’t have gone home just like that after all.)
Sora said that she was fine, but she could not even stand up on her own.
—Sorry.
The sobbing image of Sora overlapped that of his mother.
—I’m really sorry, Mitsu.
“Ugh.”
A sharp pain ran rampant in his heart, and his head was aching.
(Sora and my mom are different. She’s stronger than mom, warmer and more gentler than her, and she does like her own kid.)
I’m an ugly person who has no right to bear this child!
There was the photo attached to the postcard, with a straight cut above the baby’s head.
“I really miss you, big sister. From Ogi.”
Was Sora the one who cut the photo?
(Why? Why did she do such a thing? She said that she let her sister take her place? What exactly happened between Sora and her family?

There was a huge pile of things Koremitsu could not understand, and his head was increasingly aching.
Koremitsu kept checking the messages on his phone during classes, and Honoka, from the side, watched on worriedly.
Michiru did not approach Koremitsu on this day because of the cold shoulder she got the previous day Tsuyako did not attend school as she had to practice for a public performance.
And Honoka was the first one to ask Koremitsu,
“What’s the matter? Your eyes are red. Lack of sleep?”
“Nothing…at all.”
Koremitsu replied curtly.
“Did you get into some troublesome thing again?”
“…It’s nothing, at all.”
“I see.”
Honoka curled her lips slightly, and continued,
“If there’s anything, tell me.”
She then returned back to her seat.
At this point, she too was worried about Koremitsu, peeking at him over and over again.
Honoka’s worry had reached Koremitsu’s heart, and Koremitsu too felt concerned that others were worried.
(I just can’t keep relying on Shikibu here.)
And at this point, he still had yet to inform Honoka that Sora was bearing Hikaru’s child.
Furthermore, he was extremely gloomy not because of Sora, but that Sora’s profile kept overlapping that of his mother that left home, and he was unwilling to clarify that to Honoka.
(It’s been 10 years since mom left home, and yet I still have a longing for her.)
Honoka’s smile was so bright as she tried to cheer Koremitsu, yet the latter merely showed a poker face, and he could not even smile and answer, “I’m fine.” This caused him to be angsty and peeved.
(If only I can smile.)
He tried curling up his lips, but they remained stiff like usual.
After waiting anxiously for time to pass, it was finally time for school dismissal.
“Let’s go check out Sora’s place.”
“Right, Koremitsu.”
Koremitsu conversed with Hikaru as he hurried towards the school gates.
At this moment, the cellphone in his pocket vibrated.
He took it out, and found that the call was from Sora.
He hurriedly picked up the phone, and heard the tranquil alto voice from Sora,

“Mr Akagi? I do apologize for what happened yesterday. I just so happened to recall some past events because of what Miss Saiga said.”
There was none of the usual vigor in Sora’s voice, but it was not as erratic as it was the previous day, and there was no weeping to be heard.
“I’m going over now, Sora.”
“Sorry, but I’m not in the apartment now. I’m at a distant place.”
“Distant…place?”
Hikaru, listening from the side, too showed a incredulous look.
“Hey, Sora, where are you at now? What time will you be back?”
“Not for the time being. I just thought of going to a place I went with Mr Hikaru before. It seems I’m a little too early though, and I probably won’t be back until Autumn ends.”
She said with a lovely voice.
And there was a melodic harmony intertwined in her words.
That was the melody the kindergarten teacher played on the piano when Koremitsu was much younger, and there seemed to be lyrics to it. It apparently was a simple, cute tune.
“The glittering stars…”
Hikaru whispered, his voice as light as breathing.
(What’s with this? Some cellphone tune? No, a music box?)
“That’s it for now. Thank you for everything till now, Mr Akagi.”
“Wait, Sora!”
“Wait!”
Hikaru too exclaimed in unison.
“Isn’t there anything I can do? Didn’t you make a promise with Hikaru? I’ll do anything for you. Tell me what you wish for!”
Koremitsu pleaded.
If there’s something troublesome, tell me.
I’ll definitely help you!
I’ll protect both you, and the baby inside you!
So I’ll fulfill your promise with Hikaru! Tell me your wish!
The glittering stars melody continued to ring clearly,
And Sora, ostensibly wishing to end the call sooner, said,
“Nothing…I’m as empty as the name Sora implies, the shed skin of a cicada.”
The line was cut.
Koremitsu gripped the phone with enough force to crush it, and turned to Sora.
“Where’s the place you went with Sora?”
“I do not know.”
Hikaru answered with a pale voice.
“Because we never went traveling together.”
—I never did choose a cup for Sora before.
Koremitsu and Hikaru stared back at each other’s faces.

Hikaru looked extremely awkward, and Koremitsu too must be showing the same look.
“…What’s going on?”
“I do not know. Perhaps Sora did lie, or perhaps we did really choose a cup before, and did travel together before.”
The mist of darkness filled the heart.
While both of them were pondering, the sweating hand holding the cellphone vibrated ominously.
An anonymous message.
When the contents were shown on the screen, both Koremitsu and Hikaru had tense looks on their faces,
“The women who were with Lord Hikaru. Fourth Act: ‘Sora Semigaya’.
The culprit who sold the youth of a girl, her little sister, to a teacher.”

Chapter 4

In any case, he first had to find Sora's whereabouts.
Kazuaki had his eyes on Sora, and Sora herself was emotionally unstable, so Koremitsu was extremely worried.
The first place Koremitsu and Hikaru head off to was the Church where Sora served as a volunteer.
Sora's dead grandfather was the pastor of the Church, and Sora's family lived in the house built on the Church grounds. Looking at them, perhaps the people there would have some understanding about Sora.
However, the pastor serving in the Church apologized,
"Miss Sora's father is no longer serving the Church, and had broken off ties with Miss Sora to start a new family. The new family's address is not something that can be found easily, and this does implicate personal issues, so I can't tell you that easily."
Also, Sora did notify the Church early that she wanted to stop volunteer work for the time being.
She said that with her usual calm voice, and showed exceeding ability for her age, so I wouldn't be worried about her…so he said.
(I too thought that Sora was firm-willed and capable, until yesterday.)
—I'm an ugly person who has no right to bear this child!
Her hair was in a complete mess, blood continuing to seep from her palms as she continued to wail and yell. There was no way he could simply wait for Sora to return after seeing her maniacal state.
(Did Sora really go back there? She said that she had to be there until the end of Autumn, but…)
The calendar had progressed into September, and the new semester had begun. The weather was still hot, and the sun shining down showed no signs of fading.
Ultimately, he never heard anything about Sora's household from the Church, and neither did he hear anything about the little sister.
"We do know there is a younger brother with a large age difference, but Miss Sora never said anything about a little sister."
So he murmured.
Sora typically would not talk about her family affairs, and would help out at the Church even during the Summer holidays or Christmas, apparently never returning home.
"You said that you never met the little sister before, right?"
Koremitsu asked Hikaru as they left the Church, walking sidelong from each other as the cicadas continued to chirp atop the branches of the thick trees.
Frowning, Hikaru said,
"I never met her when I went to the Church looking for Sora back when I was in 7th grade, at least. When I handed the letter to Sora's little brother 'please hand this to your sister', he never answered 'which one'?"

Leaving aside the fact that Hikaru coerced a child into passing a letter, if one were to reconsider Hikaru's words and believe them, there should only be one 'older sister'.
In that case, what exactly was the thing about Sora regretting letting her sister take her place?
The photo that got wrecked, and that—
The message sent to his cellphone again appeared in his mind. His mouth was filled with bitter saliva, his chest wincing in agony. One had to wonder who exactly was the one sending those messages. It started from Yū, followed by Tsuyako, and then Asai, and this time, Sora was the topic.
All the messages were slandering, revealing the secrets of the women related to Hikaru.
If those words were simply malicious and nonsensical nonsense, the person sending this, if related, would have written something he did not know of.
"The one who sold the little sister to the teacher was the promoter who sold the youth of girls."
One had to wonder to what extent were these startling words reliable.
(Sora isn't the kind of woman to do that.)
She always had the goal of working in the Church, and she had been working hard on it from the moment she first met Hikaru, or even when she first entered high school.
I'm married to God. That was what she said.
What I did with you was a betrayal to God, an impure act.
How could this pious Sora possibly be a promoter for another girl?
And of all things, she sold her sister to a teacher
"Is the 'Ogi' on that postcard Sora's 'little sister'?"
"And there is that word sister there, and that she wants to meet her."
"Did Sora cut the postcard because she doesn't want to see her?"
"…I do not know. Speaking of which, is 'Ogi' really Sora's little sister? I am a little concerned about the cut postcard, if Sora did actually do it. Even if Sora did so, why did she keep the bottom half with her? Does she not want to meet her little sister, as you say? Or is it that they could not meet?"
—I'm an ugly person.
The severed baby head.
A gently smiling Sora placing her hand lightly upon her belly.
There was a contradiction in these two actions; one that should not exist.
While the contradiction gradually got bigger in Koremitsu's heart, the chirping of the cicadas intensified. The shrill chirps agitated the ears, reminding Koremitsu of a baby's cries, and his back became chilly as a result.
"Who exactly is the baby in the photo? Is that Ogi's child?"
"Logically thinking, I suppose that is the case. The child was born, so she sent the postcard along with the photo. 'Our family has expanded'."

“She’s a mother, but she’s wearing quite the loose skirt. There’s red embroidery on the skirt and that apron, so I’m wondering if she can actually do her housework properly like this.”
That loose, fluffy skirt looks like some ethnic dress, and what’s with that bright apron Koremitsu blurted out what he thought with a gloomy look.
“There is quite a lot of Tyrol tape used.”
“Tyrol—?”
“The red hem, I mean. There is a lot of ethnic embroidery tape from the Tyrol region, floral patterns, fruit patterns, and so on. You can get a lot of these things from a handicrafts shop. And that clothing…I think I do recall seeing it somewhere for some reason.”
“At Sora’s?”
“No, I suppose not. I only met her twice in the Church before this. Hm… where exactly was it?”
Hikaru again frowned, pondering.
And Koremitsu scowled as he went silent.
The chirping of the cicadas got louder.
I’m as empty as the name Sora implies, the shed skin of a cicada.
The soft whisper rang by his ears.
(What does she mean, saying that she’s the shed skin of a cicada?)
As a child, he once collected the shed skins of cicadas in the forest during summer vacation.
The dried, brown skins did have the appearance of young insects, but they were hollow within, as light as air, and so feeble they would be powdered if stepped on.
When he mentioned this to Sora, *“Is that so…that’s a pity.”* Sora’s showed a little reaction, whispering with a gloomy look.
(But why did she call herself the shed skin of a cicada…?)
And what exactly was with the satiated smile she had when she placed her hand gently on her belly, checking the child inside?
I do not have any wishes—
Was the meaning of that line not that she would feel blissful as long as she had the child?
(Is Sora as unhappy as mom after all?)
Koremitsu recalled the sight of his mother weeping, and he gritted his teeth, as there was something deep within his chest wincing in pain.
(Damn it.)
Don’t think about it.
Mom’s different from Sora. Right now, I should be focusing on Sora.
But again, Koremitsu lost sleep on this night.
No matter how he closed his eyes, appearing in front of his eyes was the powdered cicada skins, the bleary eyed Sora, and the face of his mom weeping ‘I’m sorry, Mitsu.’ over and over again.

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The next day, Koremitsu went to Sora’s college.

Hikaru remembered which seminar Sora took her lectures at, and so they visited that research lab.
There were a few students left,
“I got some questions.”
And Koremitsu asked with a sharp glare, his back slouched as he walked into the room, causing all else present to freeze in shock, sweat all over, avert their eyes, cringe their bodies and so on. Everyone knew about Sora.
“It is rare to find a woman aiming to be a clergy.”
“Her clothes are plain, she doesn’t do makeup, and she definitely wouldn’t go out for parties when we invite her.”
“I heard that her uncle’s a pastor in the Church, and she’s very familiar with Church work since young. She probably never had any intention other than to serve God, no?”
While he asked if Sora did have any lover she was dating, the students shook their heads in unison.
“Impossible. She’s pure all over, basically a bride to God.”
“I don’t think she has the luxury of that when she’s busy with her studies and volunteer work.”
“I suppose there’s that aura she emanates which you practically can’t touch her. She’s sometimes lonely, and has that pretty face that’ll make your heart pound, but even if you do approach her, it feels like she’ll break away from you.”
The students all agreed in unison that Sora did not have a lover.
And then, they noted that Sora preferred to converse with God alone than to make merry with friends.
“Did Sora mention anything about her little sister?”
“Little sister? She has one?”
“Hm…well, I never heard about that before. We aren’t exactly that close.”
‘Ah, but I did hear that she has a younger brother who’s much younger than her, two siblings. Her mother passed away after she gave birth to the little brother, so she helped change his diapers and fed him milk and so on.”
In the end, he never heard anything about the little sister.
“Maybe Sora doesn’t have a little sister after all?”
They were on the way back from college.
Koremitsu whispered as he toiled down the road dyed by the red-black sunset, the sun shining on his back down the narrow path, his face glum as ever.
Hikaru too sighed,
“It will be good if we can meet this ‘Ogi’ on the photo, but the address as cut off…it seems Sora does not have any intimate friends, so we cannot possibly hear anything about ‘Ogi’.”
His eyes hazy as he said this, his expression unbearable as his whispered,
“…It looks like Sora really intends to give birth alone.”
She had no intimate friends.
She had no family to rely on.

And she was alone in such a situation.
Her father was no longer around.
She said this was the angel's child.
Koremitsu's heart got increasingly cold within, and he became forlorn.
(I want to be Sora's strength, and her child's too, in Hikaru's place. That's why I've been going to her place every day, but Sora definitely hasn't forgiven me here.)
Perhaps Koremitsu's visits caused her distress.
He provide one pile of baby magazines and products after another, and furthermore, there was that incident when Asai paid a visit, causing quite a commotion.
Was that why Sora became so erratic? That she toppled the air freshener?
(Sora looked so happy even when she's alone.)
There was Sora with her hand patting her belly gently, her eyelids slightly raised, the corners of her eye with the mole relaxed as she smiled.
She looked so blissful like that, as elegant and transparent as looking at a religious painting.
Koremitsu wondered if that blissfulness was disturbed by him, and his body ached all over.
—I'm as empty as the name Sora implies
—The shed skin of a cicada.
(That isn't it. Sora should be very satisfied and happy.)
There's no other reason to suggest why Sora would smile like that.
If he was the one who took that smile away, who trifled with that peace, who caused Sora to apologize over and over again, saying that she was the shed skin of a cicada or something, he really had no idea how he was to make up with her.
(Because of me, mom…)
The images of Sora and Koremitsu's mother overlapped each other, and he gritted his teeth, clenching his fists.
"Hey, Koremitsu, you are wincing in agony again."
Hikaru told Koremitsu worriedly.
And he too showed a worried expression, ostensibly realizing the pain spreading in Koremitsu's heart, whispering,
"You recalled about your mother because of Sora, and it must have been painful to you, Koremitsu."
While Koremitsu was gnashing his teeth due to the awakened prior trauma, Hikaru's heart too winced in agony as he watched sidelong, wondering if he too caused Koremitsu some painful memories.
Koremitsu never mentioned to Hikaru that his mother was one to apologize profusely. The apparent airhead yet insightful Hikaru however might already realized long beforehand.
The reason why Koremitsu could not handle apologies was—
"…It's nothing."
After answering glumly, his eyebrows again curled back tightly.

“Please do not try to fool me, Koremitsu.”
Hikaru spoke with a serious voice.
“You did say the exact same thing to Miss Shikibu too. I do understand very well that you did not wish for us to worry, and that may as well be what I would have thought in your shoes. You became depressed however, Koremitsu, but I do not feel that complaining or grumbling at others is not a sign of distress or condescension. I have already caused you much trouble, Koremitsu, and it is unreasonable for you to bear it all alone. Allow me to share some.”
“…This thing isn’t something that can be solved by dividing the load.”
“What I am expressing here is that you can show some more weakness, Koremitsu! If you are not going to do so now, then when? If you do not show some weakness now, you will never become like that.”
“Don’t tell me to show some weakness here and there. It-it’s not like I can do that just because you say that, right?”
The conversation he had with Hikaru under the sunset soon got foolish.
What are we both doing here?
However, he felt a little more relieved within by the time he realized it, and it felt as if he broke free from the restrains in his body.
“…Well, I do feel some pain…but I do have to save a woman important to you, right? And there’s a chance that the child in her body is yours…I may show some weakness, but I got to continue on now.”
He said it in Hikaru’s direction bashfully.
“You really are made of a hero, Koremitsu, none of a flawed personality. Where you are facing though, Koremitsu, is where I am facing too.”
And so, Hikaru too answered Koremitsu such gaudy words with a clear tone.
Thanks to him, the head that lost its direction did not return back to its original position as Koremitsu walked on with his neck tilted unnaturally.
“Anyway, let’s investigate on ‘Ogi’ again.”
“Yes. Let us head to the high school Sora was at, and see if what was written on the chainmail was real.”
“I don’t really like it, but she might be doing well now.”
“Perhaps I will be able to recall where I saw the clothes of the girl who sent the postcard if I think harder about it. My memory regarding girls should be the best, and there should be no way it could have dulled even though I am dead for 4 months.”
Hikaru said such embarrassing words, and suddenly exclaimed.
“Ah!”
“You recalled something?”
Koremitsu instinctively turned towards the direction Hikaru was looking at.
Hikaru’s eyes widened as he stared at Koremitsu’s apartment.
“No, that isn’t it. That child is back again.”
“Hm?”
He stared closely, and found that the 4th, 5th grade body was wandering in front of the Akagis again. There were times where he stopped in his tracks

and stood there, staring in the direction of the door, before he began to wander anxiously again.
(Is that Shiiko's stalker?)
In that case, he had to say something to the boy as an older brother, and he strode forward.
"Ah."
Hikaru exclaimed.
"What now?"
"That child might be Sora's little brother."
"What?"
"I was not too certain, for I last saw him in the kindergarten. Perhaps the prior impression was that he was quite an intelligent boy. Ah! He ran away!"
"What did you say!?"
The boy began to run, perhaps having noticed Koremitsu.
And Koremitsu frantically gave chase.
"Wait! Hey! Are you Sora's little brother!"
The boy's face certainly did resemble someone, and Koremitsu too did have this impression when he met him. Perhaps it was because he was similar to Sora.
"Are you looking for me!? If you're Sora's brother, stop!"
The boy did not stop, running at a speed unfitting for a young master. Perhaps he was sprinting for his life once he saw Koremitsu as a demon, for he simply continued to sprint.
"I told you to stop, didn't I?"
In contrast, Koremitsu's breathing got heavy as he did not sleep well for the past two days.
The boy darted through some tiny gaps between buildings, taking advantage of his small size, and gradually pulled the distance.
"Koremitsu, your face is red, and you are sweating profusely. It is time for you to stop!"
Hikaru exclaimed sidelong.
"—Tch, I let a little brat get away."
Koremitsu continued to pant as he bent his knees on the now darkened asphalt.
His head was dizzy, and he really lacked sleep. The asphalt that had absorbed the heat from the lingering summer sizzled, causing it to feel like a seared futon. He really had the impulse to head home and sleep.
"Ko-Koremitsu..."
At that moment, Hikaru called out with a pathetic voice.
And while Koremitsu was still unable to get up, he felt something cold at his knees.
The rain?
No, there was a plump little black dog strolling about, raising its hind legs at Koremitsu as it peed at him.

“WHAAAAAATTT ARE YOU DOING, YOU DAMN DOG!!!”
“L-Lina! That isn’t the toilet!”
A middle-aged woman, probably the owner, shrieked with a pale face.
Rina, with a sash wrapped around its small, sharp ears, looked completely satisfied once it was done, and hurriedly scurried off once it was prompted by its owner.
“Uh, my legs are still hot. It’s disgusting. I’ll kill that dog the next time I see him!”
While he showed a heinous glare,
“Ah.”
Hikaru again exclaimed.
“What? Did a crow shit on me or something?”
He asked with a depressed look.
“I see! It is Lina, Koremitsu!”
He leaned his body forward, showing a face that could not be any brighter.
“What? Another of the girls you had an affair with?”
“No. Tyrol Tape and Rina. That is Tyrolina. That apron and skirt is the waitress uniform at Tyrolina!”
◊ ◊ ◊
After dinner, Koremitsu searched for ‘Tyrolina’ on the cellphone.
He originally assumed it to be the name of a hooker, only to discover it was a family cafe hidden in the residential area.
The owner was part of a Tyrolian Dance group, liked Tyrol a lot, had a lot of the ethnic art pieces laid all over the shop, and also sold handmade Tyrol tapes. Looking inside, there were a lot of the bright colored patchworks, cushions covered with Tyrol tape, and also dolls made of wool.
“There was once I came to this place with a girl, and the waitresses were really cute, wearing the Tyrolian uniforms. They poured cappuccino into had fruit, flower shaped cups, and used the cream to draw some rabbit, cat shapes on the top. I do remember that they have an embroidery class here, and there were only girls in the shop.”
“…I say, you’re a guy and you go to such places.”
And you’re invited by a girl of all things. Don’t you feel any shame. If it were Koremitsu, he would definitely not last more than 3 seconds, certainly feeling like he was on needles.
(Well, I guess there won’t be awkwardness if it’s this dazzling prince in the middle of all those girls.)
It definitely would be impossible for Koremitsu however, who had messy red hair and the appearance of a delinquent.
“You sure that’s the uniform, right?”
“Yes. Look, there is the photo of a waitress here.”
There was a girl shrouded in a fluffy dress and apron with red Tyrol tape by the sides, smiling while holding a tray with a cup decorated in mushroom and flower patterns for some reason.
It was the exact same dress as the one seen in the postcard.

“…”
I guess I have to go to that shop to ask about Ogi. Got to go there even if I’m to step into the shop, scare all the girls, be viewed as a suspicious person and get led away by the police.”
Koremitsu groaned, and said,
“Okay, looks like we got no choice but to go.”
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But even so,
(I can’t do it alone after all!)
During the rest period the next day, Koremitsu scanned through the map on his phone, searching for Tylorina’s location. While he frowned, Hikaru suggested,
“It is just my thought, but perhaps you should go with a girl.”
“A girl?”
“Yes. Like Miss Shikibu.”
Koremitsu was startled, and glanced to the seat beside him.
Honoka, fiddling with the phone too, turned towards Koremitsu tentatively, and the moment their eyes met.
“!”
She frantically bit her lips, tightened her face, and stared forward gingerly, beginning to type messages at an astonishing speed, her face gradually flushed.
“Hm, it will not be out of place for you to head to a fancy cafe with a girl than it is to go alone. Miss Shikibu too will surely be delighted if you ask her out like an invitation to a date.”
(A date,you say!?)
You idiot! Now’s not the time to slack around like this!
“Come on. You should be hurrying up and inviting Miss Shikibu, Koremitsu.”
Hikaru prompted.
(Uggghhhhh.)
It would be embarrassing for him as a boy to head into a fluffy shop filled only with women, and they certainly would be wary of him. Surely he would more trustworthy if he was to head there with Honoka together.
(But calling this a date is—)
It certainly was not an event this formal, and perhaps inviting Honoka out for something more casual, for other reasons would be more appropriate.
Also, how was he supposed to explain Sora’s situation to Honoka.
If he was to mention that a pregnant girl disappeared along with the child in her belly, there definitely would be some unwarranted misunderstanding again.
And while Koremitsu was rubbing his temples with all his might, Honoka again peeked at him.
At that moment,
“M-Mr Akagi. I have to talk to you for a while. Is it fine?”

Michiru, who had been avoiding Koremitsu the past two days, said this with her face flushed as she approached Koremitsu's table.
And Honoka, typing her messages, stopped her hands.
"Talk about what?"
"Not here. A-a-a-a-at the roof please."
The moment Koremitsu got up, Honoka shuddered her shoulders in fear, and looked in his direction tentatively.
Koremitsu too noticed those eyes that were so desperate, wanting him to stay.
He left the classroom along with Michiru, and ascended the stairs towards the roof. Michiru's face was flushed as she kept her head lowered, not saying a single word.
"Koremitsu, just in case, do you understand what it means to be called up to the roof by a girl?"
Hikaru quizzed with a perturbed look.
(? Are you worried that Hanasato's going to challenge me to a due or something? That's impossible, right?)
To Koremitsu, back when he was in Middle School, the roof was a battlefield, and the school's delinquents gathered at the roof would summon delinquents from other schools to the roof with something akin to a letter of challenge, and start their own battles.
Thus, Koremitsu had no idea as to why Hikaru was giving a frown.
What exactly was Michiru hoping to talk about.
And even after they arrived at the roof, Michiru continued to remain silent.
The sun did not appear as it was a cloudy day, and the air was a little humid.
Soon after, Michiru began with her head lowered,
"Mr Akagi, who do you like? Hono or me?"
"Huh?"
Koremitsu's mouth was ajar.
What was that about?
Hikaru too was taken aback, his eyes widened at Michiru, muttering something, *"Hm, I suppose there is this kind of a confession…maybe."*
"Eh, which one, huh?"
Michiru lifted her head at Koremitsu with her bleared eyes.
She let her hair ends curl nicely and dangling at her chest, and Michiru, who removed her glasses and braids, looked more feminine and prettier as compared to the first semester.
And their classmates surrounded Michiru.
"What happened, class rep? It's amazing, you're cute."
"So the class rep has such a face? Not bad."
She caused quite a commotion.
And in the midst of the circle, Michiru was feeling troubled, tentative.

Koremitsu did not know the reason why Michiru would change her hairstyle, but surely something di happen. This question however caused Koremitsu to be further confounded.
“I can’t answer that, and it’s not something I can compare. Shikibu’s Shikibu, and you’re you, Hanasato.”
Once he said this, Michiru looked despondent. She then continued to stare at Koremitsu with brooding eyes.
“Then…do you like Hono?”
The gentle breeze blowing by ceased completely.
The roof, with only the duo on it, became abnormally tranquil, only their breaths could be heard.
Hikaru too could not be seen.
Surely he was right behind Koremitsu, staring at the latter.
“Yes, I like her.”
Koremitsu’s lips let out this baritone.
Michiru’s eyes widened at that instant, and after a temporary silence, she lowered her eyebrows.
“Thank you for answering me.”
She said with a trembling voice,
“I shall be heading back to the classroom then.”
And so, she ran back.
Koremitsu merely remained rooted there for quite some time.
“I never expected you to be so honest.”
Hikaru looked amazed as he floated before Koremitsu.
“My heart felt like it was going to stop.”
“Hasn’t it stopped already?”
“However, I really am shocked at you were able to say that you ‘like her’ from your mouth without any faltering.”
And Koremitsu said stiffly,
“If I’m asked if I like her or not, I can only answer like here. I do think Shikibu’s a nice person.”
“Like…as in a normal ‘like’?”
“…Yeah.”
Hikaru looked up to the sky and lamented.
“Miss Hanasato was definitely mistaken. Ahh, I wanted to record what you just said for Miss Shikibu. I am very disappointed.”
“Why are you so disappointed?”
“I do wonder if you really do have any awareness at all? I really pity Miss Shikibu here.”
But after muttering, he quickly broke into a grin,
“However, if you do like Miss Shikibu, perhaps you can invite her out for a date once. I suppose you should invite Miss Shikibu to Tyrolina.”
“No, I’m not going to invite Shikibu.”
“Why?”
“I don’t really know…”

If the question was if he liked her or not, surely the answer would be that yes, he liked her.
While others shunned him for having the appearance of a savage delinquent, the one girl who established such an intimate relationship with him was probably Honoka.
He was always helped by Honoka.
And he was shocked when he made her cry.
And when he was embraced tightly by Honoka at the pool at night, his chest ached sweetly.
Taking all these incidents into account, if anyone were to ask him if he liked Honoka Shikibu, he would reply that yes, he liked her. As for what sort of 'like' it was, he was however still uncertain.
However, he could clearly understand that the 'like' Honoka had for Koremitsu was beyond goodwill.
Thus, Koremitsu felt that he could not simply invite her out to a date, as that would lead to a misunderstanding.
"If I can't invite her out properly for a date, that won't do."
And the moment he said these words, Koremitsu's face sizzled.
What in the world am I saying here?
"In other words, you do have some awareness."
And so, Hikaru said as he broke into an adult chortle.
"You did consider thoroughly the fact that Miss Shikibu is a girl"
"!!"
Koremitsu remained speechless, but surely he was seen through due to his blushing face, and the proof was Hikaru's cackling as he looked back at Koremitsu.
"But what do we do about Tyrolina? Do we ask Asa for help? If she is to know of Sora's disappearance, surely she will be infuriated, wondering why we did not notify or or something."
"Saiga…?"
While thinking of Asai's fuming face, Koremitsu gave a scowl,
"Mr…Akagi."
And there was a soft voice from behind.
He turned his head back, and standing at the roof entrance was Aoi, who was looking over at him tentatively.
"Miss Aoi."
"Aoi."
Hikaru drifted straight towards Aoi, and Koremitsu too followed.
After the incident with Kazuaki in the backyard, Koremitsu sent Aoi a message, but the latter replied 'please do not worry about me', and there was no message from her thereafter.
Koremitsu was already busy looking for Sora, and did not have time to help Aoi, but he was concerned about the latter.
Compared to Koremitsu, Hikaru's feelings were stronger, and he drifted around Aoi with a wince, *Are you really alright? You did not encounter*

anything awful these few days, did you? giving such a face as he looked over at her.
Aoi fidgeted about as she lowered her eyes, and they were shifting about. Soon after, her face got beetroot, and with a desperate look, she looked up at Koremitsu.
“I really am sorry not to greet you all this time.”
“No, I should be the one apologizing.”
Koremitsu did not expect Aoi to suddenly apologize, and he was unable to calm down.
Though she showed some weakness on her face, she immediately clenched her fists, and declared,
“I-I was really shocked…about Hikaru’s child…I really cannot endure the pain.”
Hikaru was devastated.
“That’s to be expected.”
Koremitsu replied with a voice even Hikaru could hear, and Aoi glanced aside, saying,
“But Miss Tsuyako, Miss Shikibu, and the rest are all so worried about the baby that is to be born, helping you out, Mr Akagi. I am the only one hesitant on this. Miss Tsuyako is supposed to be in the same position as I am.”
Koremitsu was astounded that Aoi admitted she assumed Tsuyako was in the same position as she was.
Tsuyako was one whom Hikaru had an affair with, and Hikaru’s fiancee Aoi had always despised and reviled Tsuyako.
“Well, senpai’s love for Hikaru, and yours, to put it, i-it’s a little different…”
Tsuyako was utterly delighted to tears when she learned of Hikaru’s child that was to be born, and it would be cruel for Aoi, one with a purity streak, to have the same reaction as Tsuyako.
“No, Miss Tsuyako is impressive. I do know everything, that there are many of Hikaru’s lovers who are the same, and that Hikaru does have a special someone he liked…but I just bawled out when Mr Kazuaki merely mentioned it. Even if you are to mention it again; I suppose it is a good thing even if Mr Kazuaki mentioned it.”
“Am I that much of a hopeless philanderer? I am delighted that Miss Aoi has said that she is yet to lose to Mr Kazuaki’s words, but it is, a little conflicting…”
Hikaru muttered with a pathetic look.
(Anyway, you’re a philandering harem prince who shouldn’t have your punishment reduced here. Start reflecting more on your own actions.)
And Koremitsu had this thought as he glared at Hikaru.
Aoi placed her hands in front of her chest, clenching them, and said to Koremitsu with a look filled with conviction,
“I-I too wish to meet the person who is to give birth to Hikaru’s child, and I wish to bless her. So, please allow me to help.”

One could feel the conviction from within in these words she weaved with much difficulty.
Surely she would be in great pain after Kazuaki said such damning words, and Hikaru, whom she liked since young, had a child with another woman, which really would have caused her much distress.
Yet she adamantly declared that she wanted to help.
(Seriously, it's a waste for Aoi to be with you.)
Hikaru too was amazed by Aoi's determination.
Surely in Hikaru's heart, Aoi was the fragile, cute princess, who did not know anything about the world.
If Hikaru was still alive, Aoi would surely be so infuriated that she would not speak to him for half a year, as he had stated. She would have been condescending towards the woman whom Hikaru had that affair with.
"Erm, I really am willing to do anything. If you have anything you need help with, please tell me, Mr Akagi."
If it were Aoi at this point, perhaps he could explain Sora's issues to her.
(Is that the case, Hikaru?)
While listening in on Aoi, Hikaru's eyes showed astonishment, some pride and despondence; it became a conflicted expression.
And again, Koremitsu said to Aoi with respect,
"Actually, there's something I want to ask you for help, Aoi. Do you mind accompanying me after school?"
◊ ◊ ◊
"Her Highness Aoi and Akagi?"
Upon noticing Aoi and Koremitsu descend the stairs together, Honoka frantically hid herself in a corner under the stairs.
(How? Wasn't Akagi supposed to be talking with Michiru on the roof?)
Honoka had the urge to give chase when Koremitsu and Michiru left the classroom, and had conflicted feelings on whether to do so, to a point where her stomach was aching.
Surely, Michiru was intending to confess to Koremitsu. No matter how curious she was, she could not be eavesdropping from the side.
She intended to focus on love consultation when replying on her blog, but her fingertips gradually got colder, and the chatter from the surrounding conversations felt more like noise to her.
(How will Akagi respond to Michiru. Michiru got cute because of Akagi, so maybe Akagi will answer okay. But Akagi still has a pregnant lover, and he'll be committing infidelity. No no no, it's not a good thing to do such a thing!!)
Her mind churning about, she was unable to endure this any longer.
(Neither Michiru nor Akagi came back…if-if they're to do something on the roof—I-I guess I should check on them a little. If anything really happens, I have to stop them!)
She searched hard for a reason, and left the classroom.

And so, just when she arrived at the stairs leading to the roof, she witnessed Koremitsu being together, descending the stairs.
(Why is Akagi together with Her Highness Aoi?)
Aoi's face was so tense, so flushed, and Koremitsu showed a solemn face.
And once they arrived at the second level, where Aoi's classroom was, they faced each other, saying,
"I'll leave it to you after school then."
"Yes!"
Aoi answered Koremitsu's words with much enthusiasm.
They were completely aware of each other's presence, and there was a sense of trust between them to be felt; Honoka's chest tightened.
(What did Akagi ask Her Highness Aoi to do? I told them that he could talk with me if he got any troubles, and he answered me so lethargically 'no', like that.)
He requested something for Her Highness Aoi. Leave it to you. He said.
"Akagi you idiot. You said that I'm a Heliotrope."
◇ ◇ ◇
After school.
Koremitsu waited for Aoi not too far away from the school gates,
"I'm sorry for talking with Aoi without understanding you."
He bitterly whispered, and Hikaru, with calmness on his face.
"Your decision is not incorrect. I am really delighted that Aoi is able to accept Sora and the child within her."
Replied as thus,
"Speaking of which, Koremitsu, you invited Miss Aoi instead of Miss Shikibu."
"? What do you mean?"
Hikaru gave a vague smile.
"You did show some aware with regards to Miss Shikibu, but not when it regards Miss Aoi, I suppose."
"?"
"It is fine even if you have not noticed. It is definitely a little better off not noticing it, for your sake, Koremitsu, and for Miss Aoi."
"What are you saying now?"
And with a teasing tone, Hikaru continued,
"I am saying that you are so cool, Koremitsu."
"I say, what are you getting at?"
While Koremitsu grumbled, Aoi appeared.
"So-sorry. Was I late?"
"Ah, no, I just so happened to be talking to myself."
While Koremitsu was all flustered, Hikaru drifted above,
"Let us go forth then."
Saying with a clear tone.
(Seriously, what in the world is this guy thinking about?)
Glaring aside, he began to walk with Aoi.

They got off the train, and head straight for the cafe in the residential area.
It appeared to be a house with the ground floor renovated into a cafe.
Twisting the door knob with the handmade bunny doll, the door opened, and Koremitsu witnessed what he saw on the internet.
There were cloths, threads used for embroidery, ribbons laid out all over the tables, and the handicrafts were displayed everywhere in the shop. It felt messy, yet at the same time, inexplicably tidy, and many female customers were having tea at the many tables there.
“Truly a wonderful shop.”
Aoi marvelled in amazement.
As he had expected however, Koremitsu was intimidating the customers and waitresses as they gave him terrified looks, and it was unbearable for him.
“E-erm, welcome. 2 customers, am I correct?”
A waitress, dressed in skirt and apron lined with red Tyrol tape by the side, inquired.
The pretty girl Aoi with the vibe of a princess looked relatively surprised as compared to Koremitsu, who clearly looked nothing else other than a delinquent. They were led to an empty table.
(Damn it, it’s unbearable for me after all.)
He sat on the wooden chair with floral embroidery on the cushion, opened the menu, and appearing in front of him were photos of coffee with rabbit and kitten, and cake with lots of cream on them.
(Speaking of which, is Cappuccino Tyrolian? Am I wrong?)
“I want a Cappuccino with a kitten.”
“…Coffee.”
“Eh. I suppose if you do order the ‘Miss Pixie likes the rose-petaled Herb tea, their attitude towards you will increase dramatic due to the gap moe.”
And Hikaru casually chimed in from above.
(Shut up or I’m going to smack you with the cushion.)
The waitress served their order, and placed them on the table.
While trying his best not to scare anyone, Koremitsu began to converse with the waitress.
“Is there someone called Ogi in this shop?”
“Eh!”
The waitress was suddenly taken aback, her shoulders shivering.
“Actually, that is me.”
“What!? You’re Ogi!?”
Koremitsu too was dumbfounded, staring back.
Ogi was a very healthy woman with a slightly rounded face, large in bust and hip.
He had assumed she was an adult woman due to the baby she had on the postcard, but she had a face that could be passed off as a high school girl.
(Well, she wouldn’t be looking any older than Sora if she’s the little sister. Sora looks rather mature herself, but she’s only around 20.)

He introduced himself to be an acquaintance of Sora Semigaya, and that he heard of this shop from her. Ogi's eyes widened.
"Ehhhh, sister? Really? Goodness, my big sister wouldn't make any contact with me, I thought she rejected me completely. Is that true? Did sister really tell you about this shop?"
"Ah, yeah."
Koremitsu's voice was a little shrill, for he actually did not hear about this shop from Sora herself.
However, he never expected this 'little sister' to be such an energetic girl, and there was a major contrast to 'sold youth', 'to the teacher', and 'substitute'. Aoi too was stunned, and Hikaru stared back in shock.
Ogi's full name was Ogina, and the owner of this shop was her husband's mother. The owner would be busy taking care of the child every day except on Mondays, when she would hold her embroidery class, and really helped Ogina out there. She blurted out a lot of talk without waiting for Koremitsu to ask.
"It's been 9 months now. Amazing cute. You wanna look?"
"No, anyway, you're really Sora's 'little sister', right?"
Ogina nonchalantly answered,
"Yes, though it's about 2 years."
"Two years?"
"Ah, you never heard of that? My mom and sister's dad were remarried with kids, and we became siblings. That was when I was in 9th grade, and sister was in 10th grade."
(I see.)
In that case, it would explain why Sora's acquaintance only knew of the little brother, and that Hikaru never saw Sora's little sister.
"I did something a little bad when I was in 10th grade, and due to that, mom divorced with sister's father. Well, there wasn't any passion left when they remarried, but I suppose that was the decisive event."
—I actually should not be giving birth to this child. I let my little sister take my place! It's because of me that my sister, my family.
There was such a constrasting difference between Sora's anguished voice and this little sister who continued on carefreely with a smile, and Koremitsu was confused.
"Decisive event? What did you do?"
Once he tried to probe in, she continued nonchalantly,
"My affair with my high school teacher was discovered."
And after she answered so honestly, Aoi's face was flushed.
Ogi stuck her tongue out,
"I was expelled, and the teacher was fired. Mom and dad had a quarrel, and they divorced. Ah, that teacher's now my husband. Everyone found out that I did those perverted things in the classroom, and the teacher said, 'I'll take responsibility and take care of you for the rest of my life'. It was really cool, and I fell for him again. I get on well with mother-in-law, and I do enjoy

helping in the shop. I even gave birth to a child very similar to my husband, and I don’t feel any regrets about it.”
Sorry…it’s all your sister’s fault. I’m sorry…
The discrepency just kept expanding.
At the same time, the black fog-like vagueness deep within Koremitsu’s heart gradually spread.
“Did Sora say anything to you when you were expelled?”
“Eh—I don’t really remember. Sister’s very devouted to marrying God, so she was rather shocked like a normal person, I believe. Ah, my husband actually liked my sister at first.”
He was stunned by Ogina’s words.
The culprit who sold the youth of a girl, her little sister, to a teacher. the words in that message appeared in his mind.
However, the little sister did not seem to mind to much.
“He’s a teacher, and yet he got mesmerized by his own student. Now that’s a crime. Sister however was really determined, and was very troubled when my husband asked her to go buy some stuff for club activities together. I too had feelings for my husband, so I felt this was a chance, and we did everything we had to that day. My husband was really disappointed to be dumped by siser, and that allowed me the chance to slip in.”
Plan succeeded she said, showing a bright smile.
As she had said, based on the results, Ogina got what she wanted, and felt blissful as a result.
Sora requested Ogina to take her place just to excuse herself from the teacher’s request, but Ogina was the one who willingly allured the teacher, and there was no need for Sora to feel any guilt.
Sora bore some unnecessary guilt, and was tormented thoroughly.
(Why? Why’s she apologizing so much just because she let her sister take her place?)
—I’m an ugly person who has no right to bear this child!
She said with such anguish.
And as she continued to shiver, the transparent tears slid down the contorted face.
—I’m sorry, sorry.
Hikaru too frowned, ostensibly unwilling to agree with this.
(Why did Sora disappear?)
At that moment.
“Ah, Miss Takamine. Welcome.”
Ogina looked in the direction of the door, and asked with an earnest voice.
It seemed a customer came.
“You’re here for the embroidery class today, right?”
“Ah yes, it seemed I was a little earlier.”
A fine voice rang.
(This voice—)

And it was a long time back when Koremitsu last heard this voice. 1st grade, in fact.
However, the voice that rang countless times in his mind, that caused his heart to chill and wince—
It was terrifying for him to turn his head back, but he had to do so to be certain.
He slowly turned his head around, and appearing in front of his sights was a petite woman.
The hair was shorter.
And the eyebrows were lowered forlornly.
The eyes were moist, apparently always crying.
The small white face that looked as if it would melt if one were to touch it.
The slender shoulders.
And that woman too had her lips slightly opened, her face tense.
(MOM!)
The yell that rose up his throat was hurting so much it was ripping at the throat, and surely, to suppress the surging emotions, he would look up, grit his teeth with all his might, and glare heinously, showing a very terrifying face!
Why, why was she here? It had been 9 years since they met. Why, now, of all places, did she appear?
—I'm really sorry, Mitsu.
The voice rang deeply within his ears again, and the fury rushed up his head, hurting it so much his head was going to split.
He could not do anything except to stare.
And on the other hand, he was terrified within—shivering like a feeble animal.
His mother again looked back at him, and paled like a patient, her eyebrows lowered, her eyes widened. As compared to how she appeared in his memories, she looked much weaker than before, more unreliable.
"Eh? Miss Takamine? Are you acquiantances with this man?"
Ogina too felt something was amiss as she noticed Koremitsu staring with a stiff face and the mother rooted with a pale face, yet she asked without thinking too much.
Aoi too stared at Koremitsu, her breath bated. Hikaru probably understood from this situation who that woman was, and tilted his head, showing a wince as he stared at both mother and son.
In the midst of this tense silence, his mother answered with a sighing, feeble voice,
"…No."
Just like that, she lowered her eyebrows further, averting her eyes to expel something she did not want to witness.
Koremitsu felt a searing sensation within him, and it appeared his eyes got redder. The fury gradually rising in his body, Koremitsu clenched his fists as he stood up.

And with a thud, the chair fell behind him.
Aoi, Ogina and the mother were terrified as they cringed back, and Hikaru frowned harder.
“I…don’t know you either!”
The words he blurted out was akin to the roar of a wounded beast.
A dying howl after being grazed, slashed and toppled around, it contained all his pride.
Once he saw the terror of the woman who abandoned him 9 years ago and left home, Koremitsu sprinted out of the door with the feeling of one with his heart dug out.
He did not hear what Aoi and Hikaru were yelling from behind.
And he simply continued to run aimlessly in the cursive alleys of the residential area.
(Like hell I know a person like you!)
That’s not my mom! I don’t know that person! I never met her, and I don’t know her!
He was yelling in his heart, howling, but even so, the voice ringing deep within the ears could not vanish.
—I’m really sorry, sorry, Mitsu.
The mother who continued to weep.
The tears that continued to fall.
—Sorry.
(Stop apologizing! Nothing will change even if you do, right? Isn’t everything still the same!)
And Hikaru yelled from sidelong.
That voice, his howls, the frantic breathing, and the voices that continued to ring in his heart vanished in an instant.
Somebody, anybody, make it stop!
I don’t want to hear anything!
I don’t want to see that face that';s always crying and apologizing!
Just stop it already! Stop crying! Why are you crying! Why must you apologize!?
The voices surged within him several times, forcibly pushing aside his memories, expanding like waves, and a tremendous impact arose as the red bubbles appeared and broke in the air.
That was the little felt bears with the head and body disembered.
The crying mother who cried in Koharu’s arms.
And the stuttering voice.
—Koharu, I really am a terrible mother
Those were the words he heard behind the sliding door, his body stiff as he held his breath.
—I can’t think of that child as cute in any way! How am I supposed to love him! I can’t love him!
The voice got broken.
His mother’s face was broken.

The heart got broken.
—I'm really sorry, Mitsu.
She weeped as she apologized, for she felt guilt that she could not love the baby she gave birth to no matter what.
As the mother, it was a cardinal sin that she could not love her own child.
However, she just could not do so.
He really was not cute in any way.
—That child definitely realized it. That's why he can't smile, and he blames me.
Koremitsu did not really understand what his mother was saying, and what he only heard was the timid voice uttering the words that he wasn't cute, that he couldn't smile. They stung his chest, and it got hot near his earlobes.
I've to forget it.
I didn't hear anything about mom not finding me cute..
If—if I could only smile, mom wouldn't be crying like this.
Will she stop apologizing and finally smile?
It's going to be mom's birthday soon. Let's try writing some words mom liked most.
And so, I'll smile and hand the word to her, telling her that I love her.
Yet at the roadlights outside, there was the petite figure gradually departing.
God, I hope that mom can turn back.
Please God
However, there was nothing similar to a wish fulfilled!
(That woman never turned back, and I didn't give her the birthday present. I still can't smile now.)
Even after 9 years, nothing changed. The woman who was his mother paled her facce timidly, averted her eyes from him, and when questioned if they were acquaitances, she replied with a soft voice.
—…No.
There was the sight of Sora, gently smiling as she placed her hand gently on her pregnant belly.
—Is a mother that sort of person>
—Was she always so loving before the child was born?
Was I once loved like that?
And even in high school, he never gave up on the one wish he had.
However, he understood when they met again.
(I wasn't loved at all!)
Whether it was the past or present, the crybaby of a mother had no love for Koremitsu at all, just fear and terror—
—…I'm really sorry, sorry, Mitsu, .
—I'm sorry for not being able to love you.
His mother was not really one without much emotion, and neither was she one to abuse her child. She was a normal, honest, weak-willed woman, and

thus, she was anguished that she could not love her own child, chiding herself, unable to endure the face of her own child with the stiff look. On that night, she left home.
She vanished like the dried brown husk left by the cicadas.
Towards the place the unsmiling Koremitsu could not see.

Chapter 5

Koremitsu had no idea as to how exactly he managed to get home.
And he went straight to his room without saying a ‘I’m back’, locked himself in the futon the entire time, and left Shioriko worried,
“It’s time for dinner, big brother Koremitsu.”
But though she called him, Koremitsu never poked his head out from his futon. “I’m not eating. My head hurts.” it took him his utmost effort just to give this reply.
Shioriko insisted on watching over Koremitsu, and indicated that she would not leave his bedside for a while.
“Leave him alone, Shiiko. This guy’s stubborn. He’ll get well in 2, 3 days.”
After Koharu said this, Shioriko left the room reluctantly.
He continued to keep his eyes closed in the futon, and could not see Hikaru.
Again,
“Koremitsu.”
Upon hearing this worried sounding voice call out to him,
“J-just let me show some weakness now…”
He answered with a feeble voice.
“I understand…it is fine.”
After hearing the gentle reply, there was no conversation between them.
And into the next morning, the gut-ripping pain continued to linger, and the covered blanket was soaked due to tears and sweat.
He got up a lot later than usual, and lifted the head that was having a splitting migraine.
“Good morning.”
Hikaru was seated in a seiza, showing a tender expression as he said,
“…”
And Koremitsu merely muttered something as he walked out of the room.
Even he did not hear what he said exactly.
There was a note written on half a sheet of paper, and written with grassy green pen was,
“To big brother Koremitsu,
Shiiko’s going to school now.
When Shiiko comes back, Shiiko’s going to make lots of snacks you’ll like.
Shiiko.
Upon seeing this, his throat throbbed, and his heart winced again.
When he arrived at the living room, Masakaze was reading the newspaper leisurely, and glanced aside to Koremitsu with a sharp glare, saying,
“You’re so weak that you can’t get out from bed just because of a little headache. Don’t make Shiiko worry now.”
And then, he continued to read the newspapers,
“I cleared up the leftovers thinking that you’re not going to eat. If you’re hungry just eat some of the leftovers.”

Koharu said with the usual uncouth tone, but a look at the kitchen revealed some edible rice balls and some pickles.
He was going to be late, so he wrapped the food in aluminium foil and left home.
Lapis was at the corridor, staring at Koremitsu with its blue glass eyes. Its soft white tail was curled upwards, and this was a great service from the usually aloof Lapis.
Things remained as they were on the way to school, as Hikaru remained silent beside Koremitsu. Though he would show a tender smile when their eyes met, he would remain silent. Surely he intended to remain like this until Koremitsu took the initiative to talk.
Koremitsu's chest was searing due to the concern from his family and friend.
He wanted to cry, and he was pathetic, yet he could not show such an expression.
(I got to look for Sora.)
One had to wonder what exactly was Sora doing at this point, having disappeared and harboring Hikaru's child.
But whenever he thought about Sora, the image of his mother overlapped, and he would recall the incidents where she would utter the word 'sorry' in her apologies, and 'no' the timid look on her face when she answered softly.
He was hurting as if he was scalded.
(Ugh, damn it.)
The memories he kept suppressing within him were awakened; he should have known that he was never loved by his mother.
Why however did he continue to bang his head on this. Could he never forget that crying face and the feeble voice.
(That's not my mom. I never had one in the first place. Isn't that fine?)
But no matter how he thought about it, the voice and the face would appear.
He walked in during class, sat down in the midst of his classmates' stares, gnashing his teeth as he clenched his fists and kept his head lowered.
(How long is this pain going to keep up. If something's going to happen to Sora during this time.)
The more anxious he got, the voice ringing by his ears got louder.
—I'm sorry, please forgive your sister.
—I'm really sorry, Mitsu
And at this moment, a cheerful voice rang from beside.
"Akagi, I made these. Have a try."
Before he knew it, it was lunch break.
He lifted his face, and found Honoka brandishing a cute red and purple bottle, smiling brightly.
It was rare that Honoka, who had been biting her lips lightly and fiddling with the phone, would talk to Koremitsu with such a cheerful look.
And her voice got louder.

“It’s soy cookies with added calcium. It’s a test, but I want you to try it out, Akagi.”
There were heart shaped cookies in the bottle.
“I’m full now, so forget about it.”
He turned his head aside.
“But seriously, you can at least eat one cookie, right?”
And so, she shoved the bottle towards Koremitsu.
“I really don’t need it.”
She had been looking at Koremitsu with a worried look till the prior day, fiddling with her cellphone. One had to wonder why she was being so enthused.
“Calcium’s good for emotional anxiousness. You’re always scratching your head, showing such a scary face, like you have a lot of stress piled up. It’ll be much better for you to eat this.”
Koremitsu understood very well the reason why Honoka would earnestly bake biscuits for him.
And the reason why Sora would continue to make things for the child in her belly.
However, the stinging pain in his chest just would not subside, and he did not want Honoka to see his unhappy face.
“I said I don’t need it!!!”
The moment he shoved the cookie bottle back, he accidentally knocked his hand on it, and the bottle slipped from Honoka’s hands.
The brown cookies scattered upon the floor.
The sound of the bottle hitting the floor caused all the classmates to stare at him. Michiru widened her eyes, and the others were giving Koremitsu berating looks.
“How cruel you are, delinquent.”
“What’s with you dropping Miss Shikibu’s cookies all over the floor?”
“You’re horrible.”
Everyone began to mutter, but compared to them and the now deformed heart-shaped cookies on the floor, Koremitsu’s heart chilled when he saw Honoka’s flabbergasted look, and at the next moment, his body seared.
What do I do now? Got to say something to Shikibu here.”
“So…”
But the instant he was about to apologize, the image of his mother lowering her head, apologizing, spread within his mind, and his feet got wobbly.
—I’m really sorry, Mitsu.
“!!!”
(Nothing can be done even if I do apologize! Don’t apologize! Stop apologizing!)
Koremitsu could sense the stares of his classmates piercing through him.
He could do whatever he wanted as he was always reviled by them, and just when he began to give up on himself.
Honoka said with a gloomy look,

“But I made these cookies to cheer you up, Akagi.”
And right when those words stabbed into Koremitsu’s chest like a knife, Honoka raised her right leg in a ripping manner.
“You can’t be showing a girl such an attitude! Akagi you idiot!!!”
And Honoka’s kick landed right at Koremitsu’s chin.
His mind became as white as snow, the impact ostensibly knocking his head off.
As he was large in size, he tumbled backwards, knocking into a few tables and chairs. The pain continued to linger behind him, and with some shockingly loud thuds, Koremitsu landed on the floor with his backside.
“Miss Shikibu’s scary!”
“She went that far?”
“She’s really scary.”
The classmates who were berating Koremitsu before this looked on with pale faces, staring in Honoka’s direction with terrified faces.
Honoka spun once and lowered her leg onto the ground, glaring at Koremitsu with her eyebrows raised; however, there were some tears to be seen in those eyes. She however looked away, went for the cabinet with the cleaning tools, and took out a broom and dustpan.
◇ ◇ ◇
“Miss Shikibu deliberately kicked you there. She let herself be the villain so that you will not be the bad guy.”
It was noon break.
While Koremitsu continued to look into the distance as he leaned on the roof’s railings, Hikaru too did likewise as he said this.
Hikaru’s slender hands were sinking deep into the railings, and the light brown hair gave a transparent, blonde glow when basked under the sun.
The cooling breeze filled with the presence of autumn blew by gently.
“…”
Koremitsu bit his lips.
There was a footprint left at the lower chin where Honoka kicked him, and it remained obvious. It still remained hot, and painful.
(She kicked me without thinking.)
—Miss Shikibu’s scary!
Even after involving her classmates and raising her eyebrows stubbornly, Honoka swept all the cookies that dropped onto the floor.
And after that, she returned to her seat, scowling as she fiddled with her phone.
—She’s really scary.
Those were whispers she could somehow hear, but she merely pouted her lips and stared at the cellphone screen.
(Who’s the idiot here. You became the bad guy for someone like me.)
Koremitsu recalled the weak expression she showed in a fleeting instant after kicking him in the chin, and the moment his chest ached again.
A voice came from behind,

“I heard all about it~ You got kicked by Miss Shikibu or something~”
It was Hiina Oumi, aiming her cellphone camera at Koremitsu, giving a boyish, mischievous look as she stood there.
◇ ◇ ◇
(I kicked Akagi again…)
And in the backyard that was devoid of people, Honoka sat beside a flower bed as she ate her lunchbox alone.
Surely there would be curious looks and little chatters if she was to stay in the classroom. While that was nothing much, she would think of Koremitsu if she looked at the seat beside her, and would have the urge to cry.
“I got something on.”
She said that to Michiru, and left the classroom.
Michiru too was at a loss of what to do after witnessing Honoka do that to Koremitsu, and did not exchange looks with her, “Y-yes, I understand.” merely saying that before she left.
(The cookies were wasted like this.)
Her heart was crushed when she witnessed Koremitsu and Aoi meet outside the school, preparing to head somewhere after school.
(Am I no longer Akagi’s Heliotrope.)
After she got home, she sat on the swivel chair, cupping her knees. She was brooding as she hated being so indecisive, and began to bake cookies.
(It’s to be expected that Akagi has other girls he like. I just have to do what I can do.)
Recently, it seemed he was troubled by the child that was to be born.
Perhaps he would feel a little better after eating those cookies.
But on the next day, Koremitsu arrived while class was still going on, and remained as despondent as ever, even the aura was simmering.
His face was scowling more than usual, and his expression unbearable as he gritted his teeth. Due to that utterly terrifying expression, not even the teacher dared to ask why he was late.
(Did something happen the previous day?)
She just could not let the matter rest no matter what, and tried talking with him using the cookies.
(But if I’m the one who dropped the cookies, Akagi’s the bad guy now… doesn’t that mean I haven’t helped him out at all.”
The sweet egg roll felt bitter.
“I fail as a Heliotrope…”
She muttered despondently.
“E-Erm.”
Honoka looked up at the owner of the voice, and felt as if the egg roll was stuck in her throat.
(Her Highness Aoi!)
The adorable upperclassman had a neat white ribbon tied on her long black hair, and she had her hands clasped together above her knees, her face blushing.

“I-if possible, can we eat together?”
“Eh, ah, of course.”
She answered with a voice different from usual, and moved her butt to create some space. “Please pardon me.” Aoi gave a fly-like whisper as she sat down beside Honoka.
“Where’s your lunch, Your Highness Aoi?”
Honoka noticed that Aoi was not holding anything, and asked.
“Ah, I accidentally left it in class.”
And Aoi answered so bashfully.
“Please have some then.”
“No, you may continue on.”
“But you will be hungry if you do not eat something.”
“It is fine. Please do not mind.”
“In that case, have some fruit juice at least. There’s a vending machine there. I’ll go get something.”
“No, please allow me instead.”
And after such an awkward conversation that lasted for 5 minutes, but of them had canned drinks in hand as they sat at the same place.
Honoka was holding honey milk in her hand, while Aoi was holding sugarless coffee. The latter sipped the coffee she could not ake, and asked,

“Mr. Akagi was really strange yesterday.”
Aoi went with Koremitsu to look for a certain person, and went to the cafe that person worked at.
Over there, they met a petite woman who was around 40 years old.
And Koremitsu was greatly taken aback when he spotted that woman who resembled a typical housewife. That woman too was as shocked as Koremitsu.
But when that woman said “I don’t know him”, Koremitsu too yelled “I don’t know you either!!” and ran out from the cafe.
“I gave Mr. Akagi a few calls and messages, but he never replied. This is the first time such a thing happened, so I am very worried…I then heard rumors that you kicked Mr. Akagi down, Miss Shikibu…”
It seemed Aoi began looking for Honoka thereafter.
“A woman who’s around 40…! Isn’t that about the same age as Akagi’s mom? Maybe that’s Akagi’s mom!”
Koremitsu mother eloped with his homeroom teacher when he was in first grade. The grumpy looking old man once said this when Honoka visited the Akagis’.
(I can’t think of any other reason why Akagi’s so shaken.)
After explaining what happened to Aoi, Aoi’s face froze, and her eyes too became melancholic.
“…His mother left home when he was so young…”
She whispered.
“If that woman we met yesterday was Mr. Akagi’s mother, Mr. Akagi really is pitiful.”
Saying this, she grasped the sugarless coffee in her hands tightly, and lowered her head.
—She said that she did not know him, to Mr. Akagi.
A cold breeze blew by the shade, rustling the leaves of the forlorn trees in the garden.
Honoka’s heart ached again as she remained silent.
Even for her, hailed a love expert, did not know what she could do for the one she liked.
◊ ◊ ◊
Taking a nice photo of the footprint at Koremitsu’s chin, Hiina bent down, beaming.
Her busty chest dangled about, and one could clearly see the deep cleavage in the blouse with 2 of its buttons undone.
“Ahh, it really looks like it hurts. Looks like this mark will remain for a while. Now there’s a new chapter in the delinquent’s legend. Miss Shikibu definitely did this on purpose however.”
“…I know.”
Once Koremitsu hissed despondently, Hiina stared back with some caution, “I see.”
And then said that with a beaming face.

Then, she reverted back to her usual tone, saying,
“That college girl seemed to have vanished.”
Koremitsu was startled when Hiina suddenly mentioned Sora, and unlike her usual motor spiel of a tongue, Hiina continued on slowly,
“The child in her is Lord Hikaru’s, am I correct?”
“…”
Koremitsu remained silent with a scowl.
And sidelong, Hikaru stared back at Hiina with some caution.
“Perhaps she did not wish for the child to be raised as part of the Mikados. In that case, it may be better off for the child…if the reason for the disappearance is due to her love for the child, I think that is a good thing.”: Hiina’s tone was rather serious, and the expression she showed Koremitsu all this while was so wise, it was troubling him.
“In this world, there are mothers who’ll go far away, give birth to a child in a public toilet, and abandon the child.”
In his shock, Koremitsu gasped.
Hikaru too widened his eyes.
“Well, that was to be expected.”
Hiina continued on calmly, showing some loneliness in her smile.
“Not all the mothers loved their children.”
Koremitsu’s heart was creaking away as he recalled his own mother.
—I can’t think of that child as cute in any way!
“I suppose that kid really was filled with vitality, as she was wailing out loud and gathered all the people here. That mother was found immediately, but she said she didn’t need this child, and so this child was sent to an orphanage. If it was a small town, everyone would know that famous child abandoned in an orphanage, and that child’s always called the public toilet. If she really stayed at that place, perhaps she really would be called a public toilet…”
Is that child maybe…
(Is that kid Oumi…?)
Neither Koremitsu nor Hikaru were able to say anything as they listened in on Hiina.
And Hiina, who continued to rattle on with an earnest expression, thawed. Her face, eyes, mouth all relaxed.
“But brother came to find me. He’s really an amazing person. It’s a dream for me to have a family member like that. I had a feeling that I can do anything just for this person, that I can simply be with him, even if I can’t inherit the name of the family.”
It was a delighted, optimistic tone.
One could immediately understand how much she loved her brother from that voice and expression.
“I feel blissful, my breath probably able to stop immediately, when I simply think about how I have such a family member with me.”

And she ended off her words with a Kansai dialect. One had to wonder if she had noticed it.
It was a comforting, tender, wise tone.
Was that Hiina's actual verbal style.
Koremitsu was taken aback by Hiina's motorspiel of words, and the latter showed a riveted face as she said.
"If there is a choice to be loved by others or to love others, I'll definitely choose the latter, because I'll be happier this way."
The words and that satiated smile slammed heart at Koremitsu's heart.
The sun shining down basked upon Hiina's boyish face, making her so dazzling.
Both Hikaru and Koremitsu were left bedazzled, envious as they looked at her.
◇ ◇ ◇
What I said just now was all a secret—Hiina said with an impish look before she left.
I only said it because it's you, Mr Akagi.
Because I'm worried about you, Mr Akagi.
Do you believe all the words I said?
Ahh, no, you don't have to answer me now. I'm just having expectations about you, Mr Akagi, so please remember.
The boyish eyes were smiling.
After school, Koremitsu and Hikaru were walking down the dirt path.
Both of them remained silent.
"…"
"…"
Surely, Hikaru too was pondering about the fluent words Hiina said in that Kansai dialect.
This day, and the one prior, were the worst days in Koremitsu's life.
He met his mother again, and the truth he did not want to recall pierced through his body. Why was it that the wish he always had never heard? He just continued to suffer, unable to do anything.
Because of that, he could not accept the goodwill from others properly, made his family worry, and hurt Honoka.
Honoka again returned to her seat after the break, stubbornly raising her lips and eyebrows as she continued to fiddle with the cellphone.
She continued to stare at the screen, ostensibly unwilling to lose to something, and never looked over in Koremitsu's direction once.
Koremitsu wanted to apologize to Honoka, but he didn't know what to say at all.
(I guess…I'll give Shikibu a little apology tomorrow.)
It was impossible that he would be the only unfortunate one in this world.
Surely, everyone would have their own troubles as they move on.
"Hey, Koremitsu, you should try smiling a little."
Hikaru suddenly said.

It was a cheery expression of one excitedly telling him to go play at a game corner.
“I’ll pratice how to cry.”
Hikaru drifted from Koremitsu as far as he could, turned back, and called out to Koremitsu with his arms spread under the bright sunlight.
(Smiling practice, huh…?)
Perhaps that was a good thing.
And that goes too for things he could not do, yet try his hardest to do.
Even if he did come off as a fool.
“Okay, let’s try this.”
Koremitsu too sprinted down, ostensibly gliding down the grassy patch.
Hikaru answered with a smile.
“Stop grinning away, you. Try bawling your eyes out.”
“You too, Koremitsu.”
“Yeah, I’ll smile.”
“I will cry then.”
“Hahaha!”
And with that stiff face of his, Koremitsu let out what sounded like a laugh.
“Uu.”
Hikaru too contorted his face as he eked out an anguished.
Koremitsu’s eyebrows were trying their hardest to ris up, and his eyes were bloodshot, his lips stiff as he was unable to open his mouth properly.
No matter how many times he blinked or stopped his breathing, Hikaru tried to exert his throat and temples, but was unable to let out a single tear.
But even so.
“Haha, hahahaha.”
“Uuu, uuu.”
They continued on with their laughing and crying practices.
“Hahaha, wahahaha, Hikaru, you look like you ate a dried plum or something.”
“Uuu, What about you, Koremitsu? You open your mouth and eyes so wide, you look like a dark demon lord.”
“Ahahaha, it’s difficult for me to relax my eyes like a smile.”
“Gh, uu, it feels like I am going to have hiccups, yet crying is so difficult.”
“Wahahahaha, if I open my mouth wide and practice very day, my face won’t be so stiff and soften, I guess.”
“Gh, uu, if I add chili powder into my eyes, will I be able to cry? But I never cried when I was cutting onions during a camping trip, uu.”
“Ahaha, ahahahaha, I think I got a cramp in my face. Wahaha, my saliva’s flowing out of my mouth.”
“U, uuu, I think I too snorted my nose too much the mucus is cming out. I am going to be teased by the girls.”
“Kukukuku, hey, runny nose king does fit you, kukuku.”
“Zuzu, in that case, I am going to call you the spit delinquent.”

While the world became clear before the sunset, an inexplicable period occurred.
One could sense the arrival of autumn, and they were squatted on the rustling grass as the chilly breeze blew by. They continued to face each other, making wrinkles on the tips of their noses, lifting their faces, opening their mouths as they made all sorts of expressions.
Surely, if any bystander was to see it, they would be deemed as lunatics.
(But isn't this a good thing?)
Isn't it nice to do stupid things with friends?
There was Koremitsu who could not smile, and Hikaru who could not cry.
And this duo met, forging a friendship, laughing and crying together; they could not do it well, but they were encouraging each other in their own clumsy ways.
Moving forward together.
Hikaru, who said that he 'would never change', was trying to change.
Koremitsu, who assumed he would never smile in his life, was pulling his face, his eyes widening, practically popping out as he tried to smile.
They continued to practice while scenting upon the aroma of grass, basked in the atmosphere dyed golden.
And in the end, they laid on the grass field with their limbs spread wide, looking into the sky.
Koremitsu could see a vague light at the clouds, a thin red veil ostensibly covering this beautiful light red sky..
"Hahaha…my face and chin's hurting. It's really hard to laugh."
"Uu…it is really, really difficult to cry too."
"But I really want to laugh."
"I really want to cry too."
It would be great if he could earnestly laugh.
To smile to the most important people to him.
And it would be great if Hikaru could cry.
Koremitsu made a wish under the gradually darkening sky.
(It's definitely not something that can't happen.)
That was a wish that would definitely be fulfilled.
"So beautiful…now the riverbank is dyed pink under the sunset."
Hikaru narrowed his eyes blankly.
And Koremitsu laid on the grassy patch in ease.
"Ah, yeah."
"It feels like the riverbank has become red leaves."
Suddenly, Hikaru got up.
"What is it?"
Koremitsu too got up in response, and Hikaru yelled with an agitated look.
"Koremitsu, I think I have an idea as to where Sora is! Give Asa a call!"
"What was that about? Okay."
Koremitsu drew the cellphone out from his pocket, and impatient dialled Asai's number, yelling again,

“Asa, it’s your turn!”

Chapter 6

For a long time, she had a poor tendency of looking at things in a pessimistic manner.
She always thought of things in the worst way.
Hoping that she would get 100 marks in a test, she would be despondent getting 80 marks. While feeling defeated because she assumed she would get 60 marks however, she was delighted to get 80.
There was a boy she liked in class, but even when she exchanged looks with that boy, she never wondered if that boy ever liked her.
When she thought of how it was a coincidence, thinking that he never had his sights on her in the first place, she did not feel as depressed upon learning that he was dating the prettiest girl in their year.
She was always thinking in the most pessimistic manner possible.
And when that happened, it would be better off for her if anything bad actually happened.
Sora shielded herself by not having expectations in life.
That she would never make promises because they would never be fulfilled.
That she would not look at dreams because she would wake up from them.
However, that her was as hollow as a shed husk of a cicada, and she assumed the name ‘Sora’, sky, was actually the meaning of hollow, that she was just a dried, brown, feeble, empty container, overly normal, overly boring, and that was her.
—How about we invite Miss Semigaya to upperclassman Sakagami’s live concert at the autumn festival? Isn’t it a lot more exciting to invite some girls along?
—Eh, forget about it. That person’s so serious, she’ll definitely look down on us if we party so hard.
—Her dad’s a pastor, and she’ll go to the Church for volunteer work during vacation. Isn’t it more enjoyable for her to pray to God in church than to go to a festival with us?
—Ah, I get it. Feels like Miss Semigaya’s married to God or something.
Sora would head home immediately after school so that she would take care of her much younger brother in her mother’s stead, the latter having died a long time ago. The narrative that she was a by-the-book person began sometime, and stuck with her. After half her Middle school life passed, nobody invited Sora out to play.
Her father remarried when she was in 10th grade.
Her stepmother too had a child, a girl a year younger than Sora.
Unlike the feeble, skinny Sora, she was a round girl blessed with assets, her skin and lips gave a healthy gloss, and she was a cheerful, personable person.
“If you win a 30 million Yen lottery, how will you use it?”
“if I become a high school girl, I’ll definitely work in a shop with a cute uniform, and have some love at the workplace.”

“The handsome guy Naitou sitting beside me lent me an eraser. Does he like me? Isn’t that great?”
She was so jovial when she said.
Sister, sister she greeted Sora as such,
“Sister, you’ll be a beauty if you change your hairstyle and put on some makeup. It’s a waste that you cut off your hair. Your skin’s white, so a bright color really suits you. Look, you’re wearing a cardigan with the color of a rainy sky. Ahh, it’s really a waste that you’re born a girl and not enjoy this fact.”
She lamented in such an exaggerated motion.
“Hey, the classics teacher Mr. Tomizawa seems to have interest in you, sister.”
And it was the little sister who made this little gossip.
While Sora was in her second year of high school, and her sister in the first,
“He said that he’s so moved to see a traditional high school girl with such a serious personality and so capable in modern Japan. I told him that you’re working at the church as a volunteer, and he was becoming increasingly delighted, marveling, ‘As to be expected of of Semigaya’. When I told him that the PTA will be notified if a teacher does anything to a student, his face was blushing, saying that’s not it and becoming frantic. Hey, Mr. Tomizawa’s really cute, right? He’s rather handsome, and he’s only 24. he’s very popular amongst the girls.
She was chirping so delightedly.
“Mr. Tomizawa took Miss Morikawa’s place as your club advisor because the latter’s on maternity leave. Wow. You’re now his target. It’s blatantly obvious now!”
The high school Sora studied at required all students to attend a club.
And Sora belonged to the reading club, which only had one club activity a week.
Thus, she did not have any intimate contact with the club advisor, and could not believe her sister’s words at all.
“Mr. Tomizawa’s still having a hangover today. He’s weak to alcohol, yet his bad friends forced him to drink it down. He had some medicine in the infirmary, but he’ll definitely be delighted if you dress up as a white angel and take care of him.”
Her eyes dazzling as she said this to Sora,
Please do not say such foolish words.
Sora coldly retorted.
It’s immoral for a teacher to have an affair with a student, and surely it’s a one-sided wish of my sister that Mr. Tomizawa likes me. How can a masculine adult like this plain, old-fashioned Sora?
Surely my sister’s mistaken about something.
No, maybe it’s just a prank to tease this older sister who doesn’t have interest in any man, let alone a first love, after she entered high school.

By then, Sora had already decided on being a clergyman, and surely, those around her assumed she was to be God's bride. Sora herself knew that she did not have any feminine charms, and no outstanding talents to speak of. All she could do was that thing, and she had already given up on having such a thought.
The first time she met Hikaru was not long after the indecent relationship between Mr. Tomizawa and her sister was revealed. It became a scandal at school, and Sora's father and stepmother divorced due to this matter.
Her father's redeployment was determined, and that was the moment where Sora and her brother had to live in the church her grandfather worked at.
It was midsummer, a night she could not sleep due to the humidity.
She had some uneasiness all that while, and was having difficulty falling asleep. While she was finally able to sleep due to fatigue, her eyes opened immediately.
Her frail body was covered in sweat due to the heat, and even though she opened the window, humid air would blow in. Unable to sleep, she thought she might as well read the Bible, only to find that there was none.
She recalled that she left her Bible in the chapel hall during the day when she had her prayers, and was about to go get it.
She put on the cardigan, which her sister described as the color of a rainy sky, over the pajamas that was like a one-piece dress.
It was as hot as a sauna outside the building, and she could scent upon the aroma of the plants growing lushfully in the summer.
The dim moon shone upon the courtyard, and there was something of a salacious atmosphere in this place as compared to how it was in the day.
There seemed to be something awful hidden somewhere, like an alluring stare continuing to spy upon her.
There was some noise as she stepped on the dry grass, and finally, she arrived at the chapel. There was a teaching that the doors were to be opened for all lost souls to enter, so the chapel doors were not locked. As she opened the old, heavy doors, they let out a creak.
She took the bible she left in front of the altar, and just when she was about to return to her room, there was some noise from the many benches.
"Is there someone there?"
If it is a supernatural being, I'm not afraid. God is protecting me.
However, if it was a criminal with the blood of humans dripping down him, or a homeless wanderer,
The sweat dripped from her body, sapping the heat from her as she asked, and appearing between the benches was a slender figure standing there.
(An angel…?)
The moonlight from outside the window shone in on the white body and the messy, soft hair, showing a silver glow. That clear, pretty face was exceptionally eye catching in the dim chapel hall.

And the eyes staring at Sora were practically pleading her, so clear they appeared to have absorbed light, and those petal like lips were quivering slightly.
“I am really sorry for entering without permission.”
It was difficult to determine if it was a boy or a girl, and that inexplicable clear, rich voice echoed in the forlorn chapel hall.
That voice was something Sora assumed to have come from the heavens, listening piously.
“I have no place to go to…”
That’s not an angel.
That’s a human boy.
No, he’s an angel after all, is he? I never met such a pretty body before.
But if he’s a human boy, did he leave home? If that’s the case, I can’t leave him alone!
“I-I’ll call for uncle—the pastor.”
Once she said that and turned to leave.
“Please, do not leave!”
The boy ran towards Sora, wrapping his slender arms around her, embracing her tightly.
There was the sweet scent of flowers the moment he embraced her, and she was left bewildered.
“Please, stay here. I can no longer go home…I can no longer be with that person…I do not know what I can do right now.”
The slender arms wrapped around Sora were quivering, and the little face pressing at Sora’s neck was very cold.
Sora did not know what was going on, but surely, this child had quite the damage.
And feeling the same pain within, Sora was overcome with the urge to protect the child, a strong desire to help this child.
Perhaps it was due to the humid air lingering in that summer night, and the beauty of that boy that was practically superhuman, for she was unable to make a rational decision.
“Are you…in pain now?”
She asked the boy with a tone even she was startled by.
“It hurts, like my heart is being stabbed continuous by a spear.”
“Are you depressed”
“Very, very depressed, so much that I wish to vanish.”
The boy’s arms were so slender, so fleeting, so white like snow, ostensibly able to melt into the moonlight. Sora turned towards the boy, and took the initiative to embrace him.
And the boy too embraced Sora tightly, like a lost child chancing upon his mother.
He was unable to obtain the love from the one he truly loved, and lamented with a depressed tone.

He had always loved her since young, and with that person around, he did not need anything else.
To the boy, that person was everything to him in the world.
But they could no longer be together.
They could no longer embrace each other like that.
And Sora merely embraced the boy.
In place of that woman that boy loved so much, and yearned for.
In place of that woman who could no longer reciprocate the boy's desire, and in the midst of the forlorn moonlight, Sora gave everything she could give to the boy.
She knew God was watching her when the boy pleaded him, that she should not be doing such a thing, and that it was not the right thing to do, a defiance of God's teachings, an impure act as a bride of God, something she should not do. Her conscience was continually pricked by the guilt.
No, I can't accept this! No!
I can't go along with him!
I can't be doing such a thing!
I'm God's bride!
This child is just thinking of me as a replacement for another woman!
He's just seeking this coincidentally bystander in me for help, rejected by his beloved.
I can no longer be with God, unable to be his bride!
No matter how much she refused in her heart, her entire body forgave and accepted the boy, whether it was the arms wrapped around him, the legs intertwined with the boy's icy legs, and the lips on the boy's tender face.
—Sora, you are like a cypress.
The hoarse, lukewarm voice rang softly at her ears, and there was that numbing sweet pain.
However—
The boy placed his head upon Sora's feeble knees, and fell asleep.
Shrouded by the glittering moon particles, the slender, naked body, the long eyebrows etched onto that little face, that high nose bridge, and the petal-like lips were scarily beautiful.
She really did not match him at all.
The sunlight replaced the moon immediately, shining in, and that dry skin and pathetic appearance of hers would surely be shown in front of this angel.
Too flustered and ashamed, her body was searing like fire.
I am just a hollow husk, one shed by a cicada. There is no way I can be with an angel—
The boy would open his eyes immediately, and she was terrified of how she would look in his eyes. She put on the rainy sky-colored cardigan on her speckless white body, and escaped the chapel hall.
Ever since then, the boy would look for Sora a few times, but never found him.

After school, the boy would arrive at the church, playing with Sora's brother in the yard as he waited for her.
He was most probably looking for her, looking in the direction of the chapel hall, and at those moments, Sora's heart would jump.
However, they never met.
She hide herself in the shadows of the building, never revealing herself from there.
She, such a boring person who was like the hollow shed skin of a cicada, would only cause that angel to be disappointed.
The cries of the cicadas gradually got silent, and the wind got colder. Red leaves began to appear on the trees, and the boy's appearances at the church became less frequent.
For the shed cicada brown husk that fell to the bottom of the tree, she felt it was for the best.
They would no longer meet again.
She should forget about that night, and revert back to being that pious, holy woman, for that was the lifestyle that fitted her.
However, they met again a few years later.
Sora became a college student.
Her grandfather died, and though she no longer stayed at the church, she continued to be a volunteer, and just so happened to appear at that chapel hall on that night, when the snow pelted heavily.
The door opened, and along with the turbulent winds and the icy snow, that angel, Hikaru, entered.
Hikaru peered into the church through the window in a corner of the building, and the sunlight shining through the foliage was so dazzling, as Hikaru, standing in front of her, looked ready to die immediately, his limbs and body that icy. However, Sora never embraced Hikaru.
She immediately ran away on first glance.
But a second time—she probably would not be able to run away.
Perhaps she had fallen for Hikaru after all.
That was a terror that could rivet her heart.
The snowy light shining through the window caused Hikaru's limbs to be whiter than the snow, and there was the heart aching beauty and purity.
The then middle school Hikaru probably had thought of Sora as an aunt, herself being a college student. She was not pretty, and had no unique specialty. This boring self of hers surely was not a match to him after all, and she firmly believed that if she was with him, all that would end up with was a tragic scenario.
Like back then, and even in this state, Hikaru prioritized another woman over Sora, and though he was begging for Sora, surely he would return to that prettier flower the next day when dawn struck.
Seeking that brighter fantasy.
And then, Sora, as a hollow husk, would not be able to fly, simply falling to the floor, tragically watching his back grow distant.

So instead of that, perhaps it would be better for her if she chose to turn around—
“It is fine for me not to have such conflicted feelings.”

It was soon before night was about to arrive.
The lime green bush that was bundled in a circle like a broom stood there like a pack of sheep laid out to pasture, and Sora recalled all that had happened between her and Hikaru, saying that.
She gently placed her hands on her belly.
And so, her palms and belly gradually got warmer, her heart becoming tranquil.
“Hikaru has passed away, and will never show his back to him. He is disappointed in me, annoyed by him.”
Within Sora’s belly was the Hikaru that belonged only to Sora, the Hikaru that definitely would not turn his back on her, and would definitely never leave her.
“Please be born soon.”
She said gently to the child in the stomach with a gentle tone.
Hikaru taught me that the round lime green bush of thin twigs is called the broom tree.
—You are like a cypress, Sora.
The summer night when they met.
While the sweat and fluids dripped and mixed with each other, the hoarse, lukewarm voice rang by her ears.
Once she saw the actual broom tree, she was very disappointed to find it being a messy green bush instead of a flower.
And when they met, Hikaru embraced Sora by the arms, holding her tightly.
—It is great that you are able to remain as a cypress.
“I saw it already, It isn’t a pretty flower at all, just like a ball of green moss.
Feeling a little begrudging, Sora replied.
”That definitely is not a cypress. That is a broom tree. (TN: Here’s where the confusion is as a translator. □□ would be a Japanese Cypress, and the second chapter of Genji Monogatari (with Utsusemi following immediately after). □□ would be broom tree, and that’s a completely different plant. God, I hate translating this part.)
Hikaru answered.
“The broom tree too is a soft, thin plant, and when made into a round bush, it looks just like a broom. It really is a beautiful flower.”
“Is that so? It does not have any flowers, and does not look like one.”
And so, Hikaru desperately leaned his body forward.
“That is not the case. The broom tree is really pretty, and more so when it has red leaves, like a coral. I suppose the legendary Cypress tree is the same too. Let us go look for it next time!”
He said that with a dazzling, innocent face, just like a tree.
The green broom tree surely looked plain even after she looked at it again, and was not pretty. It was a flower that could not be considered as one.
Hikaru lavished praise on Sora, saying that she was like the legendary Cypress tree, but she in fact surely was like this broom tree.
A plain, boring flower…

(But even so, I'll stay here until autumn ends.)
She made this promise with Sora.
And placed her hands on the belly, showing a satisfied smile.
"I'll tell you that I love you everyday once you're born."
Suddenly, she heard Hikaru's voice.
—The Cypress will vanish if you approach it.
Though it appeared like a broom if she was to stand and watch from afar, there would be nothing if she approached it, and thus, she was unable to do so.
What she really wanted would vanish if she approached it, and she could not touch it with her hands as it disappeared.
There was the sight of red blood dripping in front of her eyes, and in an instant, she felt a red color dyeing her vision. She was suddenly struck with unease.
She embraced her belly tightly.
It's okay, this happiness won't disappear.
Appearing on the other side of the clock tower behind the hill of cypress trees was a melody of glittering stars.
The original tune of that was probably 'Ah! Vous dirai-je, maman'.
And the girl in love was blushing, full of life as she told her mother.
Ah! vous dirai-je, maman,
Perhaps, if her mother was still alive, would Sora be able to tell her everything?
Would she be able to explain the bitterness in her heart to the one who shared her life?
Would this child that was to be born tell her so honestly, so naively 'mama, please listen to me', when he surely fell in love with someone?
The wind again got colder.
And the little Hikaru seemed to be kicking as Sora gently hummed that cute, lively melody.
Amidst the bunch of lime green broom trees that swayed gently, she spotted a red haired youth running over to her.
He was leaning forward, his shoulders a little round.
His face was stiff, staring at Sora with dazzling light from his eyes as he slowly approached her.
That boy was Hikaru's friend—…
"Mr…Akagi?"
While Sora continued to quiver, Koremitsu stopped in his tracks, hissing, "Found you."

Chapter 7

While the confounded Sora widened her eyes, the impressionable mole under them, Koremitsu slowly stopped in his tracks, and stood in front of her.

“How, do you know…where I am?”

She sounded perturbed as she asked.

The cold breeze swayed the thin lime green branches, and that breeze stroked at Hikaru’s soft hair, his eyes tranquil as he answered,

“You mentioned that it is too early, and that you will not be returning before autumn ends….I was wondering why it would be autumn, for the child is to be born in spring.”

And with a heinous look, Koremitsu stared at Sora, saying,

“You said that you’re going to stay here before autumn ends.”

“And then, I recalled that I invited you to see the red leaves of the broom tree together. You refused me, saying that you would not make promises with me, but you did remember that moment.”

“Hikaru said that you’re like the legendary Cypress tree, but you saw the broom tree that is of the same name, and said in disappointment that it can’t be considered a flower. Hikaru then promised you to see a beautiful broom tree filled with red leaves.”

Sora’s thin shoulders quivered, probably due to recalling the past, and the ‘promise’ she made with Hikaru. Her pale, forlorn face showed surprise and sadness.

And upon seeing Sora like this, Hikaru’s eyes too faltered due to sadness.

“If we made that promise, if I were still alive…we would surely be looking at the broom tree filled with red leaves.”

“Sora, you told me that ‘you can’t make promises’. But that time, you made a promise with him. If Hikaru was still alive—he’ll definitely fulfilled that promise, and both of you will be together look at the broom tree with red leaves.”

Sora’s eyebrows that were already lowered and drooped further, her eyes and the mole contorted in anguish as she looked completely despondent.

“Upon thinking about that, I was firmly convinced you will be here looking at this broom tree.”

The pain and sadness in Hikaru’s eyes continued to expand,

But even so, Koremitsu continued on steadily,

“That time, there was the melody of Twinkle, Twinkle little stars in the background, so I asked Asa to look for a place with broom trees and playing the glittering stars’”

He also informed Sora that Hikaru never forgot about that promise with her, and it was because of that memory that led him to this place.

“The melody of the Twinkle Twinkle little stars rang during our conversation, so I got Saiga to check if there’s any place with broom trees

growing and such a melody playing. Such investigations is this girl's specialty."
But the moment Koremitsu mentioned Asai's name, Sora showed some timidity in her eyes, and her shoulders jerked. After that, she could be seen folding her arms, ostensibly protecting the child within.
And this caused Koremitsu's chest to ache.
Hikaru's eyes too became cloudy.
"For a long time, I had no idea what you were thinking. After meeting you for a while, I at least know what sort of a person you are."
The broom trees rustled, and the forlorn autumn winds swayed fleetingly.
"You are a timid person."
"Sora, you may appear strong, but that's not the case."
While the world was in the golden evening sunset, she became white, pale, increasingly transparent, and everything became so transparent in this vague illusion, to a point where the truth was about to vanish as well.
While Sora continued to lower her head while cupping her tummy, Hikaru continued on sternly as he showed an anguished face,
"You said that promises are hollow because they will never be fulfilled…but the reason why you never made any promises is not because promises are empty, but you are terrified that they may never be fulfilled. You are afraid of waking up from your dreams, and did not dare to dream—that is the kind of feeble person you are."
"Sora, you're really a weak, timid person."
The eye with the mole quivered as Sora's face contorted. The sealed lips too shuddered, and perhaps she wanted to refute Koremitsu's claims, yet she could not.
Hikaru too remained anguished as he continued,
"When Asa came to the apartment, you said that you had no right to bear the child because of your little sister. I went to meet the little sister you mentioned, and she was living quite happily. No matter whether it was the bond with her husband, or that she took your place, it was all out of her own will. You did not sell out your little sister, but that your little sister wanted to do so."
"I met your little sister , Ogina."
"!"
Sora's eyes widened in shock.
And she lifted her face, looking back at Koremitsu timidly with a pale face like a child waiting to be chided.
"Your little sister's getting on well with her husband and her family. The baby's born, and she looks really happy. She told me happily that she loved her husband, and took the initiative on him. Though this led to her being expelled, her husband to lose his job, and your parents to be divorced, but she had no regrets at all."
Sora averted her eyes, saying,
"Don't say it."

She shook her head about, refusing to listen any more.
“Please, stop. Don’t talk about Ogina.”
“You have no reason to harbor guilt over your little sister!”
“You don’t have a reason to apologize to your little sister, Sora!”
Sora’s slender body jerked before she cringed back again. She lowered her head, closed her eyes tightly, and the mole under the eye seemingly became a large tear, not a transparent one, but a black tear of anguish.
“Why must you continued to suffer like that? You did you cut the postcard in half, yet keep it?”
Hikaru said with an adamant voice,
“That is to escape from your guilt.”
“Sora, you used your little sister as an excuse.”
At this moment, Sora still looked utterly devastated as she cringed back, covering her belly with both hands, enduring the pain that was not supposed to be there.
But Hikaru did not stop in his reproach,
“Sora, were you not envious of your little sister’s carefree personality? Perhaps you did like that teacher after all? When you were hesitant, your sister took your place and bonded with the teacher, so you had no choice but to sculpt your sister as a helpless, unfortunate girl. Why is that? That is because you are unable to move forward. You think of the negative no matter what, locked yourself within, restrained yourself, and did not dare to move forward. You did not dare to yearn for happiness. It was the same when you were with me; you could not make a promise because you were scared of it being broken. You refused me whenever I proposed a promise, so in fact, it was impossible for us to head out together, and we did not choose a cup together.”
But even in the fact of these cruel words, Koremitsu tried his best to convey while ostensibly crushed by the lingering pain in his heart.
His eyes widened, his eyebrows raised and his face sear, he yelled with all his might to convey those words to Sora’s heart.,
“Sora, did you not have a crush on that teacher in any case? It’s because you’re too serious, so hesitant on whether you can be in love with that teacher, that your sister took the opportunity and did it with that teacher! Isn’t it because you refused to admit it that you painted your little sister as an unfortunate person? It’s because you can’t give up on everything to get what you want, as what you sister did! Isn’t that the reason why you hate promises because you’re afraid of it betraying you!? That’s why you never made a promise with Hikaru! What you said about going on a trip with Hikaru and choosing a cup with him is all a lie!!”
The broom trees rustled with the wind.
And Sora continued to embrace herself, her face frozen due to despair, her body still in tension.

“But Sora! I really noticed that you really wanted to make a promise with me! You reenacted everything after I died! You pretended to go on a trip with me, chose a cup with me, made love with me, ***and had my child****!”*
Yes, that’s really the case, Sora.
You actually want to see the broom tree with Hikaru.
The fantasy Sora swore to keep and protect; Koremitsu’s heart was gripped in anguish as he stared at that place.
—This child encourages me.
—Do you love him?
—I do.
The sight of Sora placing her hands on her belly, looking satisfied and blissful, was what Hikaru so yearned, the sight of an ideal mother.
“It’s all your wishes, Sora…to go choose a cup together…to go travelling with Sora…you actually wanted to make promises with Hikaru…”
And even the child she protected so lovingly in the belly was…
“Sora, you do not have my child inside.”
“Sora, you’re not pregnant.”
And in the midst of the broom trees, Sora suddenly collapsed to her knees. Like a puppet with its strings severed, her shoulders sank, and also, her head sank. But even so, Sora continued to hug the belly with her hands, never removing them.
Gently and sadly, Hikaru inquired,
“Hey, Sora, you did notice it before, right?”
“Sora, you already noticed, didn’t you?”
Sora continued to remain silent, her lips firmly sealed.
Both the expression contorted by the mole and the sight of the weakly shivering shoulders caused Koremitsu to be despondent.
Hikaru too was unable to rid himself of the anguish and melancholy in his eyes,
“Perhaps it was a mix of fantasy and the reality that caused you to stubbornly believe that you have a child…at least that was the case before Asa paid a visit…why did you go about spraying fragrances all over the room when Koremitsu and Asa were talking? Why did you cut your hand with the cup? Why did you remain squatted on the tatami, not getting up? You scattered fragrance because you wanted to mask a smell; you cut your hand to cover up a scar, and you were on the floor because you noticed some change in your body.”
With his face frowning, Hikaru continued,
“The blood on the floor was not caused by the one flowing from your hands, but your menstrual blood. The moment you saw it, you realized the baby inside your body did not exist. That was why you panicked, and to cover up this fact, to not make the blood on the tatami obvious, you broke the cup and cut your arm, but that was not enough. That was why you went about scattering your homemade fragrance, yet that could not cause you to relax. You threw all the magazines and baby toys onto the bed, and once you

heard Koremitsu returning, you hurriedly got onto the floor. You stubbornly refused when Koremitsu wanted you to stand up and tend to your wounds, and that is because you got blood on your pants, and could not get up. You then vanished..”
Asai’s visit.
Perhaps that was the cause of it all, as Hikaru mentioned.
Koremitsu too did know that there were women who had similar psychological pregnancy symptoms due to wanting to have children.
And surely that was the case with Sora.
When Asai laid bare the reality to Sora, and when the period that had long stopped for months finally dripped, Sora knew.
She knew that she was empty within.
That Hikaru’s child did not exist anywhere.
Koremitsu’s heart was filled with anguish as he wondered about how Sora felt back then, how she embraced the belly that had nothing inside.
Yet he continued to grit his teeth, telling Sora,
“The blood from your cut arm was meant to hide the other blood on the tatami, and the fragrance of green tea and grapefruit, and the reason why you wouldn’t stand up; that’s the reason. You knew the truth, Sora, yet you wouldn’t admit it. That’s why you ran away!”
The night thickened, and in the transparent, cold air, Sora continued to cuddle the belly just like that day, stammering these distressed words,
“B-because, Hikaru never left me with anything…”
Some transparent tears fell from the eyes filled with despair.
The lime green broom trees continued to rustle in the cold breeze. Sora’s thin hair was messy as she bent her slender body, eking out all her strength into her voice as she said,
“I was really shocked when I heard that Mr. Hikaru passed away. How did that pretty, glowing boy die like that? When we first met, I thought I met an angel…he was so pretty, so innocent, and I felt ashamed just being with him…even the fact was that he lived and breathed in a different dimension from me. Basked in the stares of others, beloved by everyone, he was a special person so dazzling…I met him many times near his school, and he was always surrounded by many girls. All of them were so cute, pretty, young and fresh; surely they are all outstanding princesses…that Mr. Hikaru will be a better match for him…perhaps I too can believe Mr. Hikaru’s feelings for me if I’m of the same age as him, pretty, innocent like those girls…but I’m not that kind of girl!!”
Sora’s holler scattered in the white, blurry world, and the branches of the round bush of the broom trees were extended, ostensibly tugged away as they fell to a side. It looked to be shrieking along with her.
“Compared to Mr. Hikaru, I really am just an old aunt. I am not compatible in terms of looks to Mr. Mikado, just a stubborn, unchanging woman who’s stuck reading the bible—I don’t really love God, but everyone says that I’ll be married with him, and yet I’m a woman who can’t refute that. The reason

why Mr. Mikado had that spur of interest in me, and that he let my brother pass on this message, is because I'm just avoiding Mr. Mikado. I never made a promise with him, that's all! I'm just a naive, curious kid chasing an escaping cicada! If I didn't run away, Mr. Hikaru definitely wouldn't be chasing me!"
And Sora's words caused Hikaru's expression to anguish.
Koremitsu knew that Sora had self-esteem issues with regards to Hikaru.
To all the girls in the world, being proposed by a dazzling prince was a wonderful dream to them.
However, Sora was not a woman who dared to dream.
That was why she was fearful with regards to Hikaru's love.
How could such a pretty boy actually fall in love with this older, boring woman? Surely it was not his true thoughts, and surely his interest in her would wane, and she would be tragically abandoned.
They were definitely not a match for each other even if they were together.
Surely she would feel the distance between them, and she would feel depressed within.
Thus, she definitely would not make promises, never making foolish dreams.
Yes, Sora feared Hikaru.
And not because she feared Hikaru's feelings, Hikaru's love.
She feared of letting Hikaru learn that she was a boring woman unworthy to be pursued, so fearful that she could only leave a thin coat of cicada skin behind, escaping.
And she cuddled the empty belly, her pale lips trembling as she shivered, "But after I learnt of Mr. Hikaru's death, I recalled the sight in the church, when I found him completely injured, and the comfort I gave him…and I regretted it…no, this surely is just me whitewashing matters. I'm a timid person, **giving up immediately when I can't get what I want**, and my heart becomes unbearable, with me wanting to escape this fact. I too was like this with regards to my little sister…why is it that I can't go shopping with the teacher alone? It was me he invited, and not my sister. My sister's just taking my place. When they got married and had a child, I couldn't bless them. I could only think of my sister as one stained by the teacher, a laughing stock of everyone at school, an unfortunate, pitiful girl who got expelled by the school. I really—am ugly."
And while the broom trees continued to rustle, Sora ruffled her hair as she squatted down. While Koremitsu watched on in anguish as she continued to hurt herself with her words, he thought of Ogina, her little sister.
Ogina was a cheerful, optimistic woman who would boldly say what she wanted, and would do her best to plan for that cause.
Perhaps she was shallow for being expelled from school because her love with her teacher was exposed.
But the way she smiled and declared 'I have no regrets at all!' was so cheerful, convicted.

A woman like Ogina probably would not feel intimidated even if her partner was an Arabian millionaire or a European prince.
No matter even if it was a dream that lasted for a night, she would devote her cause to it, play with it, reveal in it, and never feel a single regret about it, narrating it to others as the most wonderful dream she had.
Sora could do none of that.
The more she was allured by the other party, she would first think of the devastation, despair, dark future.
And before that dark future arrived, she would escape first, leaving only a shed skin behind.
And then she would continue to be imprisoned in her escape.
At that moment, if she had accepted him.
At that moment, if she had chosen to move forward.
“You’re right that even with regards to Mr. Hikaru, my mind was a complete blank, and my heart was completely broken, regretful. Tha-that’s why, as you said, I chose a cup with Mr. Hikaru, and went on a trip with him… perhaps all those would happened if I did really accept him…that was my wish that seemed real, but was not. The child too…if Mr. Hikaru had my child…if I could have given birth to Mr. Hikaru’s child…I thought of this every single day, and my period stopped, I found difficulty in eating meat, and I vomited a few times, like morning sickness, and that was when I began believing that I had Mr. Hikaru’s child. This child was growing in my belly, with my blood flowing in him, and surely it would not cause me to hallucinate, and never will it abandon me. It’s a Mr. Mikado that belongs to me. If this child’s to be born, I’ll protect it with all my might, to love him. I can say the words I couldn’t say to Mr. Hikaru, ‘I love you, I really love you. I love you, I really love you.’”
One had to wonder what sort of feelings Hikaru had hearing Sora convey her love.
And Hikaru, standing beside Koremitsu, was wincing, his head lowered as he looked down at the hollow, tragic sight in Sora’s eyes. The breeze rustling the broom trees stroked Hikaru’s hair as he showed a melancholic look.
Sora continued to sob as her voice continued to crack,
“B-but, when Mr. Hikaru’s cousin Miss Saiga said that the baby can’t be born in that cramped apartment, and when she said that the baby has to take a DNA test when born…when she gave me that ‘a crude, boring person like you can’t possibly have Mr. Hikaru’s child’…I felt someone pinching deep within my belly…that something warm was flowing from my buttocks, my thighs…at that moment, I knew that my belly was as empty as my name…I’m just a hollow cicada skin; the one who loved Mr. Hikaru and was pursued by him’s a shrieking cicada, and I’m just the skin that fell onto the floor! I have nothing! Nothing at all!!”
Sora continued to cuddle her empty belly as she lowered her head deeply, her shoulders quivering.

Koremitsu finally understood why did her eyes become that hollow when he mentioned the cicada skins.
When he mentioned the gathered cicada skins blown to the floor and crushed, Sora looked so forlorn.
—Is that so…that's a pity.
He recalled that day when Sora's mole looked like an eye, and his heart gripped.
—I'm as empty as the name Sora implies, the shed skin of a cicada.
And he also finally understood why Sora sounded so forlorn in that phone call…
To Sora, who deemed herself the shed husk of a cicada, 'Hikaru's child' was her hope and emotional crutch.
And she lost it.
(Sora right now definitely will have despair in the future. The sights she once he in front of her vanished just like that, leaving behind an endless hole. How am I supposed to deal with this?)
Koremitsu's mouth secreted an unbearable taste, and he could not find a way to stop Sora's tears and laments. It was just like the scene when his mother kept apologizing to him, where he could not do anything.
(What am I supposed to do now?)
Sora continued to sob, looking extremely lethargic as she looked around at the rustling broom trees.
Once she awoke from her dream, she was left with the icy reality. Her expression contorted, ostensibly told that the Cypress Hikaru passionately dubbed her was all a fantasy.
"I'm not some legendary Cypress, I'm just a broom tree that can't be compared to a flower!"
"That is not true! The broom tree is no inferior to the Cypress tree in being a beautiful flower!"
And Hikaru's yell seemed to be blocking the winds.
The voice contained such intense, agitated emotions, striking Koremitsu's ears and heart directly, causing him to shout.
"That's not true! The broom tree's an outstanding flower itself!"
"Stop lying…"
Sora slowly lifted her lowered head, trails trickling down her face.
"It doesn't have any petals, no bright colors, just a messy, crude pile of grass. How can such grass be considered flowers?"
Sora's face could not be seen, but one could see through the blinds of her thin hair the tears that dripped, and the wailing words grazed Koremitsu's heart, for he knew Sora had no intention of his words.
"You have yet to see the blooming red flowers, the broom tree dyed."
"Sora, you haven't seen the broom trees with red leaves on them."
"Mr. Hikaru did say that, but ever since I came here, I've been looking at these trees, and I finally know. No matter how I look at it, the broom tree

doesn’t have flowers, just some branches gathered together. Even if it’s autumn and the tree’s dyed red, that’s just it. It’s really disappointing.”
Hikaru’s eyes had all kinds of emotions as he looked at Sora, and with a forceful tone, he said,
“Are you still going to set a safety net for yourself, Sora!? Are you going to determine that the broom tree with red leaves are just some unimpressive, boring flowers…to deny that they are flowers? Now then, I shall show you how wonderful the broom tree is, and that it is no lesser than the legendary Cypress!”
“Stop being depressed at the future that’s yet to come because of that insufficient imagination of yours! I’ll now show you the best broom tree there is! The broom tree that’s no lesser than a Cypress tree!”
“Stand up, Sora!”
“Come with me, Sora!”
And while holding Sora by the right arm, Koremitsu dragged her up.
Sora’s arm left her empty belly, and her knees straightened with ease.
“Mr. Akagi…”
With tears covering her face, Sora looked up at Koremitsu timidly. She flailed her arms, stamped her feet and continued to struggle, trying to escape Koremitsu’s hands.
“I’m not letting you get away!”
Koremitsu widened his eyes, yelling.
That voice and expression startled Sora, her shoulders jerked as she was unable to say anything.
With determination not to let go of her, Koremitsu held Sora’s arm firmly as he moved forth to where Hikaru was headed.
Hikaru’s eyes were as adamant as ever, looking poignant and more masculine than usual. He floated in the air, continuing to move towards the hill of broom trees. The breeze blowing by caused his soft hair to flow towards the back.
And behind him was Koremitsu’s quick steps.
And Sora, held in Koremitsu’s arm, was behind him, breathless.
They arrived at the top of the hill, and upon looking back, the sunset that yet had to fully descend gave off a dazzling light, shining upon Koremitsu and Sora’s eyes.
And Hikaru’s cheerful voice rang,
“Have a look, Sora.”
Both Koremitsu and Sora narrowed their eyes in unison due to the light that was too dazzling.
The sun was slowly setting on the other end of the trail of hills, and the broom trees growing upon them gave off a phantasmic, faint red color.
That place was dyed a dazzling gold and hue of red, resembling a paradise in the heavens.
Majestic, riveting, cute, a reverie.

The flowers dyed in the red hue extended their leaves in the accompanying breeze.
And Sora, right beside Koremitsu, widened her eyes, watching this scenery breathlessly.
And basked in this dazzling light, Hikaru too was dyed a faint red along with the broom trees.
With his rich, sweet voice, he said,
“The broom tree has the same name as the legendary Cypress, that one cannot see its true beauty if approached too closely. That is why it has to be seen from far. Hey, this is a beautiful ‘flower’ is it not? It really is an impressive ‘flower’, is it not? As with the autumn air, the green flowers will be dyed a light paint like the faces of girls in love, and the advancement of the months will cause this delicate pink to slowly become a refreshing, passionate red. The magnificently refreshing green broom tree is slowly morphed by the early autumn into a faint red, and one cannot help but gasp and amaze at how adorable it is, how much of a masterpiece it is. The flowers of a broom tree may never bloom, and perhaps they are just some crude, unimpressive flowers. The broom tree itself however is a ‘flower’. You said that a green broom tree is not impressive, no Sora? No other ‘flower’ can sweep away the bitterness in a person’s heart like it can. Rich and beautiful, one can obtain a peace of mind growing such a plant in the garden. It really is an outstanding flower.”
Hikaru’s tone revealed his longing and love for Sora.
One had to wonder how much Hikaru actually loved Sora.
And with added power and emotions, Koremitsu conveyed Hikaru’s words to Sora.
“You see, this thing’s really breathtakingly beautiful, right? If you get too close to it, the broom tree’s just like a simple, rich bunch of branches and leaves, but if you look at it from far away, it’s really a magnificent ‘flower’, Hikaru once told me with such passion on his face that even a green broom tree dyed with the color of autumn can cause one to feel at peace, and anything that feels hazy in the heart can be swept away by this broom tree!”
And after hearing Koremitsu’s words, Sora remained unmoved as she stared at the faint red grove of broom trees, tears seeping from her eyes.
“Sora, perhaps I could not see your true self as I was trying too hard to pursue. Perhaps you were a broom tree more than being a Cypress. However, after looking at you clearly, I can loudly state that no matter whether you are like the Cypress or the broom tree, I really love you!”
His eyes cheerful, Hikaru professed these words with conviction.
And Koremitsu yelled with all his might,
“No matter whether you’re the legendary Cypress or not, you’re a wonderful woman, Sora! You’re an outstanding flower, like the broom tree with this color here!”
Sora’s hands were no longer resting on her abdomen, naturally dropped to the sides.

Surely she moved her quivering lips for her emotions were about to overflow.
And Hikaru embraced Sora's shoulders, saying softly, ostensibly wringing out her courage,
"Sora, you are the outstanding flower that enthralled me within. A beautiful, wonderful person like you cannot possibly have a dream you cannot have fulfilled."
Hikaru's voice could not possibly reach Sora; however, Sora seemed to hear it on the hill dyed red by the sunset, and she raised her eyebrows, looking at Koremitsu with bated breath.
"Make a wish, Sora.'
"Say your wish, Sora."
"Do not think of a bad future. Do not run away, and say your wish."
"I'll tell you that your wish will definitely be fulfilled."
"I…"
Her eyebrows dropped, and her lips quivered as she lifted her head at Koremitsu, tears glittering in her eyes,
"I wish to say goodbye…to Mr. Hikaru."
◊ ◊ ◊
The next day,
Sora had a sky-colored cardigan over her her shirt, waiting for the wish to be fulfilled under the sunset at the main entrance plaza of her college campus. The hem of the skirt could drift in the air, and there was a transparent cloth on her skirt, ruffling.
Koremitsu stood by the doors, anxiously checking the time.
It was to be the time of the promise.
With trusting eyes, Hikaru whispered.
"Please help fulfill Sora's wish."
"Leave it to me."
Koremitsu answered with a deep voice, and strode forth.
While the students wandering around the plaza stopped in their tracks, muttering away, Sora too turned to where the commotion was.
There was a boy with messy red hair and a sharp expression dressed in high school uniform, his back slouched and eyes raised as he approached Sora.
The crowd was staring at the boy in amazement, whether it was due to that red hair, or that he was dressed in a suit, appearing in this college campus.
The students naturally parted to the side, forming a path in front of Sora and the boy.
Both Sora and the boy walked down that path leisurely, shortening the distance between each other.
The boy pouted his lips unhappily, surely because he was finding it awkward to be in the school, and got tense due to the surrounding stares.
Looking at how desperate he was, Sora's lips showed a smile.
That boy, Hikaru's friend, pulled Sora towards himself and carried her up.
That scene was akin to a scene in a drama.

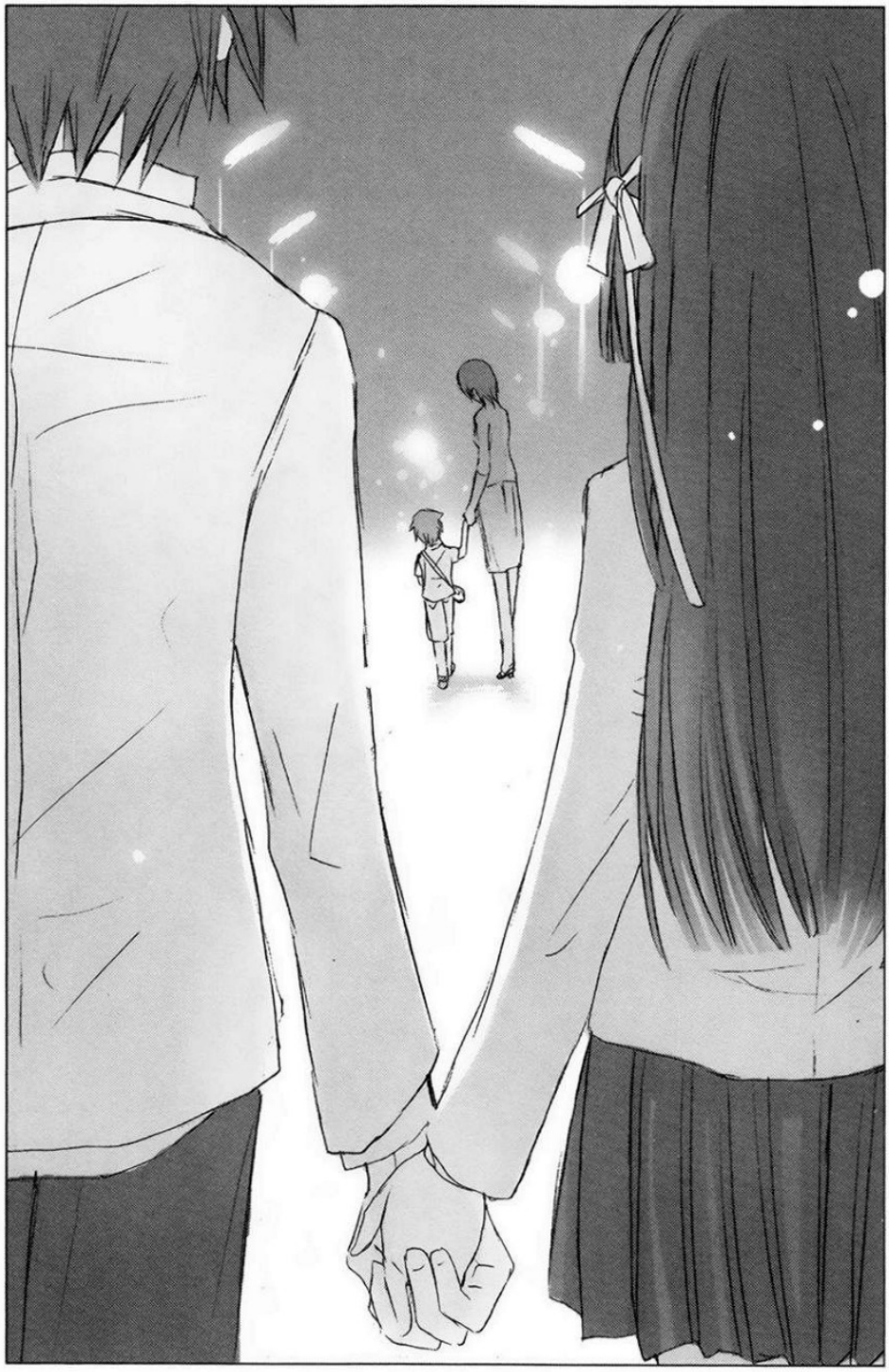
The thin, firm, boyish arms lifted Sora's slender body with much strength.
And while everyone was looking, Sora too raised her toes, reached her arms out, and latched herself around the boy's neck, embracing him back with all her might.
And the startled stares assaulted them.
However, Sora still showed no fear. At this time and place, she certainly was the heroine with the biggest shine upon her.
At this point, she would be bidding the best farewell person to her beloved.
Yes, the best, blissful farewell possible.
"Farewell, Mr. Hikaru."
And with the vibrant array of emotions contained in this soft whisper, Sora moved her lips, almost touching the boy's, and the boy, Hikaru's friend, froze still, seeming a little hesitant, blushing all over.
However, he did not push Sora aside; instead, he embraced Sora's body forcefully, rendering both almost breathless.
Hikaru's representative was gentle.
And he fulfilled her promise with Hikaru.
Sora was no longer the shed skin.
Sora's name no longer meant the 'hollow', but the endless blue 'sky'.
To become greedy, she would have to make new wishes.
And even if there were things robbing her, no matter whether there were things unable to be fulfilled, she would no longer remain rooted, and no longer cup her head and scurry.
When things were not going well, she would not fear pain and farewell, enjoy a little hurt, and bid farewell properly.
The hope that vanished could be replenished with new hope.
She would fill her heart with dazzling memories.
She would put on pretty clothes, wear high heels, let her hair down, and walk out of the door.
Once Sora released the strength from her arms, Hikaru's friend too let his arms loose.
And both of them remained silent as they head off in different directions.
"Farewell, Sora. Thank you for saving me twice.
Hikaru's rich words appeared to reach Sora's ears in this sweet golden mist of the sunset, as the latter's skirt fluttered, her thin hair swaying as she strode off cheerfully.
♢ ♢ ♢
The street lights began to light on the way back home.
And at the street near his house, Koremitsu spotted an unexpected person, stopping in his tracks.
"Aoi."
Aoi looked up at Koremitsu, looking bashful and worried.
"Sorry, but I was worried about you, Mr Akagi…"

It seemed Aoi was worried for Koremitsu after their visit to Sora's little sister, and Koremitsu ran out screaming. Realizing this, Koremitsu's heart tightened.
He did send a message to Aoi before, but he never apologized.
"Sorry about what happened before. I ran off on my own."
"No, that is alright."
Apparently, Aoi was more worried about Koremitsu doing such a thing rather than herself being abandoned, and seemed afraid of Koremitsu suddenly turning to run away. She kept frowning, staring right at him.
Due to the overly direct stare filled with all her vigor, Koremitsu felt a lot feeble, depressed.
(Nso it's not just Shikibu. I even worried Aoi.)
Back then, Koremitsu was always alone.
Whenever he did something, he did not have to consider what others would think, and never did he made anyone like Aoi worry for him.
(But now, I'm…)
At this point, Koremitsu knew that ever since he met Hikaru, after getting involved with many diffierent people, his actions would cause others around him, unnerving them.
So whenever Koremitsu wanted to say or do something, he could not simply thijnk about his own matters, but also the people around him.
But though that was his thought, Koremitsu could not do it fully. It was fine for him however to take every single step, and slowly becoming strong yet gentle.
And Hikaru, standing right beside him, watched over Koremitsu and Aoi tenderly.
"Thanks for coming…but I'm fine now."
Koremitsu too looked back at Aoi with the same honest expression, and answered seriously. Perhaps , he matured a lot more compared to how he was at the beginning.
"About Hikaru's kid, and Sora…I managed to settle them."
After that, Aoi's shouilder could be seen jerking slightly.
"…I'll tell you the rest later."
Yes. And Aoi nodded, whispering.
"Where's your car, Aoi?"
"I came alone."
"Isn't that dangerous?"
"I wanted to do this."
It seemed Aoi matured a lot more than how she was 3 days ago, giving Koremitsu a somewhat matured look.
While Koremitsu was skeptical about Aoi's change, "It's dark now. I'll send you back." and just when he blushed, saying that.
"!"
Koremitsu spotted a petite woman standing quietly in front of his house.
(Mom…)

There was a 1st grade boy standing beside him, and her unreliable, frail shoulders were shivering as she held onto that boy's hand. Her face again looked ready to break into tears, looking straight at Koremitsu with guilt in her eyes.
Aoi too noticed at the the woman was the same as the one they met at the shop Sora's sister was working at, and she too cringed nervously as she stood beside Koremitsu.
Koremitu frowned hard, causing his face to stiffen as he continued to look at his mother.
(Why…why do you have to come? You said you don't know me, and you're giving that teary face. Are you going to say sorry to me again?)
The inside of his throat became bitter as his body ached all over. His mind was boiling hot.
He was so infuriated, so vengeful, and his clenched fists were quivering. However, rising up his heart was not rage, but the desire for his mother in his childhood.
This person never loved him.
She did not fine him cute, and she did not know how to love him. She just kept crying and complaining to Koharu, sobbing away and apologizing to her son, repenting over and over again…and she's so thin and lethargic as a result. And then as a result, she abandoned her duties as a mother, leaving Koremitsu as she left home.
She was such a feeble, despicable mother, so cruel, so inept as a mother…
(But I like this mom.)
He hope she could smile and turn back to look at him.
He loved his mother, and thus, he hoped she would be able to stop crying, and tell her 'I'll protect you, so please stop crying'.
After his mother left him, Koremitsu was obsessed about not getting any love from her. His eyes are so savage, and he was just a brat, not cute at all. He could not smile even after pulling faces. That was why mom worked so hard, and suffered so much. No matter how she cried, he could not make her love me.
It was like Sora who said that she was the shed skin of a cicada, saying that she was just a boring woman, not a match for Hikaru, and despaired over it. Pondering hard over it, Koremitsu too struggled and brooded over it, before finally giving up.
However, was not what he really needed was not to be loved, but to love others?
Koremitsu repeated the words Hiina said in his heart.
—If there is a choice to be loved by others or to love others, I'll definitely choose the latter,
—Because I'll be happier this way.
She concluded with a sweet smile.
She was a family member who could not profess her love for her beloved brother, but if she really had a blood relation with that sort of an

outstanding person…it was fine for her to simply be with him, so blissful that she would be rendered breathless.
(I really, really love her.)
His hatred and rage were no longer within him.
The burning sensation surging his throat continualy lingered there, and that was left.
The more important things were, the more likely it would be impossible to see them after being too close.
And thus, he would pray to be loved, to be treated gently. When all that became impossible, and when he despaired, the more he could not see what was important to him, and he remained in the darkness of the hole, lost within himself.
But after separating, he finally understood, and finally saw it.
(I want mom to be able to smile.)
While they separated, he kept wondering if his mother was berating and torturing herself. Whenever he thought of how his mother was crying, his heart was in so much hurt it felt it was going to split.
The boy holding the mother's hands had a blue felt bear tied to the bag slung diagonally, and it dangled in the air.
"Mama, I'm hungry. Let's go back."
And he looked at his mother, smiling innocently.
(Ahh, looks like that guy's able to smile properly.)
That was an unrestrained smile that firmly believed in the mother, and Koremitsu felt conflicted emotions all over.
Thank goodness, mom's definitely able to smile properly in front of him.
Surely she loved him well.
And lived on happily.
Thus, Koremitsu's brother was holding his mother's hand firmly, giving a big grin.
That little thing alone caused Koremitsu such unmatched happiness.
The happiness accompanied the surging tears, causing the throat and eyes to feel spicy and painful.
Mom, you don't have to show such a crying face again.
You don't have to show guilt for me again, or suffer because of me.
Even if we don't meet again, even if you're never able to love me, I'll continue to love you forever, mom. As long as you remain happy and smiling.
Go get your happiness.
Go smile brightly,
And never show any hatred or despair. That was his only wish from the bottom of his heart.
The voice was stuck in his throat, and he was unable to convey it into words.
And so, he gathered his strength in his mouth, trying his best to raise his lips.

And he realized Aoi beside him was watching, startled.
She was watching him look at his mother, looking ready to break into tears, and suddenly widened her eyes, before she looked ready to break into tears again.
I really love you, mom. Really.
Am I smiling now?
Did my feelings reach you?
The facial muscles he forcefully lifted were numb. Tears fell as he exerted too much strength.
But he was smile.
For the one important to him.
What else was he supposed to do other than to smile?
(I'm fine here. Even if mom isn't around, I'll continue to smile and live properly. I made friends.)
Koremitsu continued to snivel and smile.
And slender fingers quietly grabbed Koremitsu's frozen stiff hand.
It was Aoi.
And in response to that warm, tender hand, Koremitsu instinctively grabbed it back.
His mom frowned hard, tears forming in her eyes as her lips moved.
However, the words could not be formed as she simply lowered her head deeply, very deeply.
"What's the matter, mama? Why's that big brother crying and smiling? Why are you crying too, mama?"
And while the boy felt inexplicably skeptical, his mother patted his head to calm down, held his hand, and turned to leave.
The street lights shone on his mother's slender back.
He would no longer pray for that back to turn.
Replacing that was a prayer, that his mother would continue to be happy and smile with that boy with her.
And a slender figure, accompanied by a small figure, slowly vanished into the other end of the street lights.
Aoi's hand, which he was holding so firmly to, was so warm, and the tears sliding down his face felt so warm.
Koremitsu held Aoi's hand with his own trembling hand, and Aoi tightened her grip on his hand.
Their hearts were trembling in unison.
If one were to notice, Hikaru too was watching over the duo with a tragic, beautiful smile at that point.



◇ ◇ ◇

Koremitsu, do you know about the 'starry time'?
In his story 'Momo', Michael Ende mentioned that,
"At certain junctures in the course of existence, unique moments occur when everyone and everything, even the most distant stars, combine to bring about something that could not have happened before and will never happen again."
This special instance is truly a miracle.
To me, Sora was that sort of a person.
When I was in such unbearable pain, she miraculously appeared in front of me, giving me a hug..
There was the one I admired, the one I could not get.
There was the one so distant from me.
And the one who purified me from such despair and pain was Sora.
At that moment, the one who embraced me and redeemed me was Sora.
I viewed her as being too sacred, and neglected the delicate parts of Sora as a female. It is because of my neglect that Sora kept suffering, and left you much tragic memories.
Perhaps the more important that thing is, the more people dared not to look straight at it.
But even after knowing that Sora is so feeble, so timid, I still find her cute.
No, perhaps it is because I witnessed her weakness that I became increasingly in love with her.
I suppose others too were attracted not only by her will and beauty, but also by her weakness.
Humans are supposed to be weak, who need others to lend them a hand.
Hey, Koremitsu.
Back then, Miss Aoi held your hand firmly, and you held back hers.
At that moment, did the stars in your hearts not mee?
Stars resonate with each other, letting out a pretty, crisp sound. Did that not cause your heart to tremble?
Even if that emotion was for just a fleeting moment, it was a special moment, truly unforgettable.
Back then, when I saw both of you supporting each other…
Koremitsu,
Surely both of us will slowly change.
Surely there is not a lot of time for me to stay on this Earth.
Right now, I can be certain that like the changing positions of the stars, all sorts of changes will occur.
You smiled for the one important to you.
That smile showed your thoughts for your mother, so brave, so tender, a warm, determined smile.
The practice finally paid off.
Truly, it was a heartfelt smile, and if I had a physical body, I would surely embrace you, praising you, telling you it really is a good job.

After many years, your mother will be redeemed thinking about your smile.
And you too will continue to change, continue to grow.
After 10 years, who will be standing by your side?
No matter who stands beside you.
No matter who stands beside Miss Aoi.
I shall love both of you from the skies above.

Epilogue

Two days later.

After informing Asai that Sora did not have a child, the former narrowed her eyes, and hissed in a rampage, “What is the matter with that woman? I actually arranged for her to live peacefully in a place nobody else will know of, and came up with a list of potential hospitals for the birth!”

After a long spiel of sniding and complaints, Koremitsu retreated with a defeated look.

“I really caused you trouble there, Asa, but I never expected you to find out where Sora was that fast. That’s a great help.”

And after he said that, Asai sealed her lips tight, turning her head sharply to the side as she said.

“Of course. You could have requested me for help right from the beginning. It was entirely your miscue, Mr. Akagi.”

After saying that coldly, she turned her head towards Koremitsu with much pressure, glaring at him sharply,

“You hear? You are to report to me the first thing if you are in trouble because of Hikaru again.”

And she continued with her chiding.

“…But if it is your personal problems, it is not that you cannot look to me for help.”

Muttering that, she turned to leave.

“What’s the matter now? Asa’s becoming very mature here.”

After hearing Koremitsu mutter this, Hikaru smiled wryly,

“Just to you.”

And he said those inexplicable words.

Tsuyako too was devastated when she learned that Hikaru’s child did not exist.

“Mr. Akagi, comfort me.”

It took him a lot of effort just to placate her, and Tōjō, who had assumed the child within Sora to be Koremitsu’s, gave a deathly scowl.

“You were fooled by a woman’s lie because you did something guilty yourself. Even if she does have a child, and you want to admit it, or that you want to compensate her to abort and make her a crying wanderer, you could have rejected her if you did not do anything guilty in the first place. You should reflect on your actions and exercise caution.”

Perhaps it was because he had his own experiences with regards to the matter that he took the entire break to give Koremitsu a long sermon.

And Hiina herself appeared while giving her usual cheerful look.

“Too bad that you can’t be a papa here, Mr. Akagi. If he’s born, I’m prepared to record down a diary of you raising a kid here. Ah, do you want to have a baby with me? You’ll be a dad in another 10 months and 10 days later.

She continued on with her incessant chatter, and Koremitsu asked grimly,

“Oumi, thanks for what you said back then. Also, do I know your brother?”
And Hiina showed an impish face.
“It’s a pity to say it now. That’s a secret.”
She then turned to leave.
Koremitsu was also prepared to apologize to Honoka for toppling her cookies.
“It’s fine…I’m not angry.”
Honoka looked a little forlorn as she smiled.
After informing Honoka that the child was a hoax.
“Is that so. Now then, you’ll be able to sleep well, Akagi.”
Though she sounded optimistic, she averted her eyes from him, looking forlorn. It was a fleeting instance, so Koremitsu wondered if that was just him seeing things, but,
“Hey, Shikibu.”
“What?”
“…It’s nothing.”
For some reasons, he couldn’t blurt out what he wanted to ask.
Hikaru too did say some strange things before…and ever since then, his periods of silence and pondering became frequent.
Back then, Aoi held Koremitsu’s hand because the latter cried upon seeing his mother. In any case, surely Hikaru did not have to brood with such a serious look…
The sensation of Aoi’s hand still remained on Koremitsu’s hand, and surely, that had to be because it was an overly unique situation.
“Hey, I’m not going to fall in love with my friend’s fiancee. Stop giving me that bitter brooding look.”
On their way back from school.
Koremitsu scowled and complained at Hikaru, who was brooding alone again.
“Eh, was I showing such a bitter face?”
Hikaru answered with ambiguity.
“Well, Koremitsu, you should not judge things too quickly here. Things may happen between man and woman at any given time. Even after being ruined, I still cannot abandon my love for the one I could not love.”
Hikaru stared afar, giving a faint smile.
(Of course, this guy still hasn’t settled his issues with his stepmom.)
The circumstances that led to Hikaru falling into the river was ambiguous, and Hikaru himself seemed to be hiding something—
(Really, did he just slip and fall into the river? **Was that all**?)
And at that moment, there was a commotion coming from the direction of Koremitsu’s house.
“Wah!”
“Stop trying to run away now! You’re the one wandering around my house trying to stalk me, right?”

Koremitsu frantically dashed over, and found Shioriko swinging a broom down in front of the door, smacking the buttocks of a boy who fell onto the floor.
The boy tried his best to escape from Shioriko's assault as he tried to excuse himself.
"Y-you're mistaken."
He replied.
"Are you peeking into our house! You want to try running away from here?"
"Big brother Koremitsu! This guy's a stalker after all! Are you a student at my school? What year and class? What's your registration number? I'm reporting this to the principal!"
Shioriko swung her twintails as she swung the broom again—
"That's enough already, Shiiko."
And there sounded a gruff voice.
Koharu appeared from the door, dressed in a short apron over her jersey.
Koharu and Koremitsu both had faces of a hoodlum, and when the former looked down at the boy, the boy's face turned beetroot, looking as scared as he was when Koremitsu hollered at him.
"That's enough already."
"But."
"That's fine."
Once Koharu ordered sternly, Shioriko left the boy unwillingly. In the meantime, the boy scampered away, looking like his legs had a missile attached to them.
"Ahh! Wait!"
"Shiiko, don't chase him."
"Why?"
And while Shioriko puffed her cheeks in ostensible protest,
"…It's fine."
Koharu quietly muttered, and in response to that silent voice, Shioriko seemed to realize something as she clicked her tongue, putting down the broom in her hands.
Koremitsu too was dumbfounded by Koharu's words.
(He's someone Koharu knows?)
Speaking of which, Koharu's son, whom her divorced husband claimed, should be of a similar age to Shioriko, about 9 too.
"That child does not look like he is Sora's brother."
Hikaru flatly stated.
"Wait, Koharu, was that your…"
Yes.
The way he had his lips curled into a frown did resemble someone. It was very similar to the sharp of the mouth he would see in the mirror every day, and in other words, should be similar to Koharu's—
Shioriko and Koremitsu probably had the same thoughts, and they turned to look at Koharu.

However, Koharu coldly stated,
“Who knows. I don’t know that kid, I guess.”
She muttered.
However, there was a rare, fleeting expression she showed behind this tone, she then turned away from Koremitsu and Shioriko to avoid showing them the face.
—No.
When Ogina inquired about Koremitsu, his mother replied as such, her eyes fleeting. The image of that overlapped with that fleeting, despondent look on Koharu’s.
Why exactly did Koharu choose to give up on the child? Why did she not see him even after he left her at such a young age? Koremitsu could not comprehend.
However, the aloof words and the drooping face clearly stated the love for the child she gave birth to after 10 months of labor that could not be held back.
So, in that case.
When Koremitsu’s mother answered ‘no’ while showing that fleeting expression, perhaps there was some form of a lingering feeling in there.
Just like how it could not be noticed when up close, but only discovered when afar.
9 years ago, Koremitsu’s mother abandoned her love for him, and the fact remained that she left him. Perhaps it was a meaningless fantasy for him to continue thinking about such matters now…
◇ ◇ ◇
(Maybe I am useless to Akagi already.)
After school, Honoka was updating the blog on her cellphone alone in the empty classroom, realling the events over the prior days as she gave off a gloomy vibe.
Once she learned from Aoi of the coincidence that was Koremitsu’s encounter with his mother, she was so worried about him that she tried approaching him near his house.
Later on, there was a woman with a child standing in front of Koremitsu’s house, with Koremitsu and Aoi standing there as the former kept staring at the woman.
Surely that was Koremitsu’s woman.
From a corner on the street, she watched Koremitsu attempt to smile at the woman with bated breath.
It was the first time Honoka saw that Koremitsu, who usually pouted with his cheeks puffed, who always looked grouchy, show a smile.
That was a forced smile of happiness that griped anyone’s heart, a smile that practically said to the mother who abandoned him ‘I’m fine here’—
There were tears in his eyes, yet he continued to smile, and Honoka, witnessing this, was about to cry. When she saw Aoi hold onto Koremitsu’s

hand tightly, and the latter doing the same back, Honoka's heart was practically ripped out.
After Koremitsu's mother lowered her head and left, the duo continued to hold hands tightly, never once letting go.
(Why was it that I wasn't the one beside Akagi, but Her Highness Aoi instead?)
If Honoka had been beside Koremitsu back then, surely she would have done the same thing. However, the one there back then was not Honoka, but Aoi. Surely, this was a confounding of fate.
(I couldn't help Akagi when he was trying his best to smile.)
"Hono."
Honoka lifted her head after hearing someone call out for her, and standing over there was Michiru.
She flusteredly blinked to avoid Michiru seeing her teary eyes, and closed the cellphone.
"The committee meeting's over? I'm hungry, Michiru. Let's get something to eat before we head back; I want some ice cream, the double flavor of caramel and custard kind."
"Hono, you aren't the sort of person to like that."
"I guess it's fine to eat some sweet things that'll cause me to vomit once in a while."
Surely she would break down into tears if she did not show such optimism, and once she answered, Michiru stared back grimly, before breaking into a chuckle.
"You're lying, Hono. You really like Mr Akagi, don't you?"
◊ ◊ ◊
The hair, short enough to reach the nape, swayed along with the hem of the skirt as Sora strolled through the school cheerfully.
Thinking about it, how foolish was she before she bid farewell to Hikaru?
(I actually believed that I'm bearing Mr Hikaru's baby.)
Surely there was no way she could have bore Hikaru's child.
(On that winter night when I was reunited with Hikaru again, I embraced him tightly as he was rejected by the one he loved, completely worn out and wounded emotionally. When Mr Hikaru fell asleep in my arms however, his face was so pretty when lit by the snowy lights, like God. **And I ran away as a result**."
She wrapped Hikaru in the cloth from the altar, and got on her toes, doing her morning prayers while mesmerized.
Yes, on that night, Hikaru and Sora did not so anything that would have caused a child to be born.
◊ ◊ ◊
"How laughable it is, Third Princcess."
With the black wig on his head, Kazuaki had a red one-piece dress fluttering about, sealing his bright red lips as he said with a sweet, rich voice.

“The ‘beloved’ of thaaaaattt beautiful Hikaru is actually that Sora Semigaya? Surely she is just an ordinary college girl. I knew that right from the beginninnnnggg.”
The chameleon suddenly reached his long tongue out to catch its prey, and Kazuaki narrowed his eyes, looking hopelessly mesmerized, before saying snide words.
“That is a bitch of a non virgin who immediately sexed with Hikaru after meeting him. How can she possibly be Hikaru’s ‘beloeved’. Mr Akagi however panicked like that when I merely said a few words, and he got fooled completely by a lying non-virgin!!”
Surely Hikaru’s ‘beloved’ was far in comparison to Sora Semigaya, for she was the best.
“So basically, she is a bitch who is 10 times worse off compared to Sora, no?”
Feeling peeved by this, his face was ccompletely twisted.
Hikaru’s ‘beloved’ was,
Raising the icy cage, Kazuaki placed his face onto it, and spoke with a sweet, rich voice.
“Hey, Third Princess. I want to have Hikaru’s child. How am I supposed to make it mine? My thing?”
♢ ♢ ♢
Summer is ending, and the orange Forget-me-nots had already wilted, but I definitely cannot forget about you. My eyes are always allured by you, and my body and mind yearns strongly for you, like a burning fire.
So, I decided,
Hikaru.
I shall forget all my love and hatred for you, and let them flow with the river.
And that day, please turn back and look at me—

Side Story

“Eh!! So, the matter about Hikaru’s child being born is completely false?”
Once Tsuyako said this, the underclassman Koremitsu Akagi puffed his temples weakly, and clearly stated,
“Yeah, Sora isn’t pregnant. Sorry to make you worry so much over Hikaru’s kid, senpai.”
And then, his ruffled red hair drooped along with his head.
“How can that be?’
It was after school. Tsuyako, dressed in a pale green Furisode with red sakura decorated all over it for club activities, collapsed butt first onto the floor, her shoulders slumped weakly.
“How terrible. I did think of 50 names for the child, and I already requested for a designer I like to design.”
To Tsuyako, Hikaru, who had long died, was like a glowing moon in the sky. This round, elegant, and bright moon shone itself fully onto the flower called Tsuyako. He was her eternal lover.
Once she learned of a baby that would inherit Hikaru’s bloodline, she broke down in tears, delighted due to her overwhelming emotions.
However, this was all .
And Koremitsu, Hikaru’s stiff-face friend, could only watch this utterly devastated Tsuyako and contort his terrifying face, his eyes glaring everywhere as he muttered.
This vicious-looking delinquent king Koremitsu was shunned by the other students, deemed a wild dog. His true personality was actually an extremely kind boy, and surely, he felt that he bore a huge responsibility.
“Mr Akagi, come comfort me.”
Tsuyako remained seated as she slowly lifted her head, and sounded a little miffed as she said that.
“What?”
Koremitsu gulped.
“Sit in a seiza.”
“A seiza?”
“It’s senpai’s orders.”
“What are you saying now?”
“I am saying this because it happened. Now that it is like this, what can I do?”
Though a little flabbergasted, Koremitsu sat down with his face blushing. Koremitsu closed his knees together tightly in an overly serious manner, and Tsuyako leaned her head on them, causing him to widen his eyes in shock.
“Wh-what are you doing, senpai!?”
“A lap pillow. Hikaru often gave me this treatment once I am worn out from my Japanese dance practice.”
“He actually did such gaudy things!?”

For some reason, Koremitsu glared at the roof, yelling.
“After Hikaru played with the girls in the day, I will do this for hhim as well when his legs are fatigued and wobbly.”
“!! You bastard!’
Again, he glared at the roof.
“Mr Akagi, your knees are stiff and uneven. Hikaru’s knees are so tender, they make one dreamy.”
“Like I got a say in the matter! If you don’t like it, hurry up and get up!”
“No wanna~”
She continued to pretend to sleep.
“You have yet to console me. Now I am so lethargic due to the shock that I cannot get up.”
“Then what am I supposed to do?”
“Caress my hair, and the praise me saying that I’m the most charming woman in the world.”
“Hey!”
“If not, I will continue to remain like this. Miss Shikibu will come looking for us. Oh, remember to caress the hair tenderly.”
“!!!”
In contrast to Hikaru’s delicate fingers, Koremitsu had bony, clumsy fingers, and the latter placed one down a few strands of Tsuyako’s hair, before moving the entire hand.
(This hand is so large and full of bones, so hard…yet it feels so tender…it certainly has Mr Akagi’s flair.)
There was the scent of sweat, and a noticeably faint scent of ink, coming from Koremitsu’s body.
Unlike Hikaru’s sweet scent, Koremitsu’s was a little repulsive, but it was a mixed scent that would cause one to feel comfort—a masculine scent.
“Sen-senpai, you’re…th-the, prettiest, i-i-i-in, th-th-the wo-word…!”
And he kept stuttering, ostensibly struggling.
So strange yet cute was his words that Tsuyako bit her lips hard to contain the impulse to laugh.
And on the other hand, her heart gripped when she recalled the rich sweet voice Hikaru used to say to her so fluently, ‘you are the most beautiful red weeping cherry blossom in the garden, Tsuyako’.
The owner of the garden was more dazzling than anyone else, so much of an infidel, yet so devoted…
“Do you know…back then, I was really, really delighted, to learn that Hikaru’s child would be born into this world.”
She turned around on this lap, and turned towards Koremitsu, curling herself as she whispered.
Koremitsu, who had been carassing her hair all this while, paused. He then ccontinued on again, but the effort this time was more tender and delicate.
“I was really delighted…to be able to see a child inherit Hikaru’s blood and protect him from up close.”

“…”
“I was thinking that I can send some cute Ubugi when he visits a temple. I would have given blessings for the Peach Festivals or the Dumpling Festivals, I just felt agitated whenever I thought of what sorts he would be wearing for Shichi-Go-San. If it were a girl, I would have gone shopping with her, and if it were a boy, I would have taught him how to be an escort for girls, and dance to add on to the fun…”
“…Senpai, how old you will be at that time? Can you complete a song without panting then? Either way, you’re thinking too far.”
Koremitsu retorted with a serious face.
“This is the time where you should be saying you’re an eternal dancing princess, senpai.”
“No, gramps back home keeps yapping that he’s still working, but his bones just ache like bad whenever winter comes.”
(Have you associated me with your grandfather, Mr Akagi?)
After sighing,
(I cannot allow myself to be belittled any further.)
Tsuyako again turned towards Koremitsu’s face, widened her eyes to look up at him in a mesmerizzing manner, and leisurely opened her lips,
“Mr Akagi.”
“What now?”
“You never experienced anything other than a kiss, no?”
“!”
Koremitsu widened his eyes as he looked down at Tsuyako. He then stammered,
“Th-that has nothing to do…with this now, right?”
“If you are willing, Mr Akagi, I am willing to be your first time, you know?”
“!”
Koremitsu’s face was blushing so much, he was at a loss of what to do.
“How about it? Am I not enough to satisfy you? I will keep it a secret from Miss Shikibu, you know? Of course, that applies for Miss Aoi and Miss Asai.”
She narrowed her eyes at him. Resting on Koremitsu’s knees and the floor of the clubroom were the red hair curled at the tips and the radiant sleeves dyed a bright blue, dancing along with the red sakura in the air.
And at the next moment, Koremitsu raised his eyebrows, chiding harshly.
“I can’t make a joke about that, senpai! If it’s someone as charming as you, I’m a little shaken even if I know it’s a joke! I don’t have much restraint myself, so won’t it be bad if I’m to take action in this mood!?”
(Mr Akagi, those words are truly irresistable to me.)
And Tsuyako’s face was sizzling red.
(I really have to hand it to you.)
She wanted to tease this immature, cute underclassman of hers, only to end up blushing instead.
(Hikaru, your best friend really is not to be underestimated.)

And Koremitsu seemed delighted as he snuck in a smile, before curling his lips into a frown again.
As that overly serious expression was too strange, Tsuyako placed her cheek on the stiff knees, letting out a chortle that got increasingly louder.
“Hey! I’m serious here!”
“Hoho, of course I know. I will not be joking the next time I approach you, for I will be for real. In that case, I will be mentally prepared to be attacked by yuou.”
“!!! I say, stop saying such erotic things!”
Since she could not longer watch over Hikaru’s child, she would instead watch over the boy Hikaru recommended.
Mr Akagi, who exactly will you fall in love with in the future?
Amongst the girls who were mesmerized by your devoted, clumsy, determined tenderness, who will you choose in the end?
As I am told off by this underclassman who likes to carelessly dampen moods, I shall continue to observe from now onwards.
If you are to be continue saying those words with such a face, perhaps even I may accidentally fall in love with you.

Author's Notes

Hello there, this is Mizuki Nomura.
The character in this 7th volume of ‘When Hikaru Was On the Earth…’ is Utsusemi. ‘The one who bore the child…’ does have the image of ‘Akashi’, so I was wondering if I should have titled this volume ‘Akashi’ during the planning phase, but this is obviously Utsusemi. The first mistress in the original work Utsusemi left quite an alluring profile when she left only a veil behind.
Both Utsusemi and Asagao were women who rejected Genji, but unlike the Asagao Princess who had noble status and looks that set her at a higher bar that made her a mismatch for Genji, Utsusemi, who kept rejecting Genji while having conflicted feelings within her was much a much more realistic target. Rereading it again, the feelings of bitterness continues to gripe the heart, and it really is wonderful. Utsusemi is not as glamorous as the Highness Murasaki and Oborodukiyo, but I do think she is a woman that is more flavorful when experienced more.
And so, the theme of ‘doing it…’ was determined to be ‘Utsusemi, with some elements of ‘Akashi’ mixed into it. Miss Takeoka’s character setting of Sora is simple yet somewhat cute, a perfect compliment to the impression given in the work.
Sora really likes to drink green tea in this story, and makes grapefruit refresheners. However, there is a limit to the amount of caffeine and aroma to take in based on the actual pregnancy situation, so please be careful when intaking them!
There was a rash of baby boom for a certain period in my workplace, so a lot of people tried doing different things for the sake of the babies. There were some who had the photos of their babies stuck in a corner of the room, and they all look so round and cute, the room became the healing spot in the workplace.
Getting back on topic, I did mention in the previous volume ‘Asagao’ that this series will be progressing into the latter half. That will imply that the story will be ending in 12 volumes, so there was a lot of confusion…I do apologize for this. **The latter half does include ‘Asagao’.** There is a total of OO volumes, and so, OO volumes are expected to be left. There will be lots of disruptions and events happening while I continue to write, so currently, the details are a little vague. I do wish to write when the release dates will be, but I cannot be certain until the official release, so I do apologize for keeping things vague. The original draft ends at OO voolumes, so I have to wait patiently while I check with the HP brand under Famitsu Bunko.
As for Koremitsu’s love, it will be a royal rumble beginning in the next volume. Relating to this, there are many readers who mentioned something they were really puzzled with right from the beginning. Why is Kotobuki from ‘Book Girl’ so similar to Honoka? Perhaps it is because the narration of

their appearances make them appear to be tsunderes, no? Personally, I wanted to write a girl with a completely different personality and habits, so I was troubled by it. If I have to say, Honoka should be similar to Kotobuki's friends, Yuuka and Mori.
There seems to be a lot of readers worried if Honoka's love will end up like Kotobuki's, but 'Book Girl' and 'When Hikaru Was On the Earth…' are two completely different stories.
And before long, please continue to read on to see who Koremitsu finally chooses.
No matter who matches up, or not, please continue to watch on with kindess.
The next volume, the 8th, is 'Hanachirusato', themed around Michiru, but Koremitsu does have his own troubles with other girls, and at times, he will remain still, while at others, he makes up his mind. The volume is expected to be released at the end of summer vacation, so I hope to meet you with again.
See you again!
Year 2013, March 15th
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あとがき。
がんばるんだ
ほのぼの。

Coming Soon!

〝花散里〟

ヒカルが地球にいたころ……⑧

著／**野村美月**　イラスト／**竹岡美穂**

「ぶ、文化祭の実行委員に、赤城是光くんを、推薦します」
みちるの発言に始まり、月夜子主催の日舞研の出し物、
さらに朝衣からも特別警護班への参加要請と、
文化祭の準備に奔走するハメになった是光。
慣れない学校行事に四苦八苦する彼に、正体不明の助言者が現れ――!?